GREMLINS [1984]

by

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More than Muppets with hormonal problems. As a film, *Gremlins* is a disaster. It's scattered; it's direction changes constantly; characters come and go with no rhyme or reason; major plot elements are left unresolved. We're constantly distracted from the action because each scene looks like some other film we've seen but can't quite place. Joe Dante seems schizophrenic, his attention cannot be focused in any one direction for more than a few seconds. He cannot decide what kind of a film he is making: is he criticizing the culture? Is he criticizing those who criticize the culture? Is he criticizing himself? Yet despite its lack of resemblance to what we would call good filmmaking, there seems to be little question that what Dante is putting on the screen is exactly what he wants. An undeniable strength is felt in what is seen. An overall intensity, no matter how scattered, and a pervading intelligence, no matter how obscure, will not allow us to dismiss the film out of hand.

Our confusion arises from an unusual yoking of form with content. We are used to seeing mainstream films where the form is used to support the content, not fight against it. In the past, a lack of coordination between form and content has been counted as a point of fault in filmmaking. But in Gremlins, we must reconsider this problem.

One of the difficulties in dealing with this film in an analytical way is that there are two distinct and rather different directions it takes. The form and the content seem more separated than most other films we have previously experienced. On close inspection each element seems to have its own, independent intent. Briefly, the content is a scathing social critique of American values disguised as a vicious little monster film. However, and herein lies the difficulty, this critique is wrapped in an envelope that can be considered an unusual experiment in post-Modern film making. Each aspect must be considered separately. We will then have to see if they can be reconciled and integrated in some coherent way.

A partial list of what Joe Dante attacks is like an inventory of beliefs held dearest and nearest to the hearts of what is commonly called "middle America." Let's look at just a few: Christmas carolers who turn out to be taken as missionaries from hell, an invalid killed by her own wheelchair, drunken cops arguing childishly about who's going to drive, a logically capitalistic bank owner that strongly resembles a cross between Scrooge

and the Wicked Witch in *The Wizard of Oz*, a capitalist system run by dog-murdering monsters at the top and Yuppie toadies below, innocent microwave ovens and juicers that turn into devices of gruesome death.

But there is more: talking Christmas trees used to sell Christmas trees, ineffectual inventors cajoled by their families into believing they are successful, priests that stand by and willingly allow others to be eaten by malicious mailboxes, the YMCA (that is, "Christian") swimming pool is turned into a baptismal font for a black mass, the "family" that Disney's family-oriented films entertain is turned into a pack of horrid, vulgar creatures, corrupt police try to get free Christmas trees, we see a bank president cross against a stop light, breaking the rules. So, both money and police are corrupt.

And still more: Barney, the All-American dog, destroys one of the few foreign objects in the film, an imported Bavarian snowman, the most common color scheme is red, white, and blue, the most brutal forms of genocide are shown and endorsed: the locking of a full theater and setting it afire, within every child's teddy bear lurks a murderous beast, the idea of Santa coming down the chimney at Christmas will never be the same, a cute dog almost killed by Christmas lights, Robbie the Robot is turned into a booze salesman taking order on the phone, the director even places his own credits inside a bank.

This list could go on almost forever. That's how rich this film is in social criticism. However, before turning to the post-Modern aspects of the film, I would like to look at a few aspects of its social critique in more detail.

The Gremlins themselves seem to be some sort of catalog of the fears of middle America. Sometimes the fears are real and sometimes they are imagined; sometimes they are about the future and sometimes about the present. For instance, the leader of the gremlins, Stripe, has a tall, narrow white shock of hair on top of his head that cannot be mistaken for anything but a mohawk haircut. Now, mohawks are now long associated with that tribe of Native Americans but are rather a common and popular symbol for the punk movement. This association is later reinforced when we see a little bit of pogo or slam dancing. But what better symbol of middle America's paranoia about teenage punks than to have the leader the evil band have a white mohawk, blow his nose in the mother's curtains and spit on cute, cuddly, and saccharine Gizmo? My God, if we let them, with their rock-and-roll music and dope smoking, this is what they'll do to all of us.

And it's worse than just that. If the Magwai cannot be touched by water, they it is eternally damned. It can never be Baptized from its Eastern, pagan ways into Western, Christian ways. Its power can never be tamed. It can never really be civilized.

There are racial fears too. While more perhaps subtly represented than other fears, they too are unmistakable. We see one of the gremlins break-dancing. Clearly it is Browns and Blacks that a known for break-dancing. How many whites have you seen successfully break dance? We see one of the Gremlins dressed as an old Black blues singer. Orientals come off no better as the point of the whole film is about our welcoming

an Oriental invasion of our technological soil by evil little Gremlins under the guise of cute Gizmos.

The only foreign car to be seen in the whole film is the Hero's VW Bug (maybe this too is a reference to another genre film). Basically, we see it three times. It is introduced at the beginning of the film when he is trying to get to work. While he tries endlessly, it just won't start. We can assume that while he is willing to go to work, his car is not. The second and more interesting time we see the VW is when he is about to rescue his girlfriend and to do battle with gremlins. Expressing all our xenophobic stereotypical prejudices about Germans, now the VW seems almost joyfully ready, willing and able to go to war against the Gremlins! The third time we see it is after the rescue: It is now needed to escape from the marauding band of evil doers. Does a stereotyped German car retreat? Never. Again, it refuses to start.

Another use of automotive symbolism is the car the Peltzer drives. Now consider, what kind of car would a self-deluded, unsuccessful, but imaginative inventor drive? It certainly would be an American car. The two most famous failed Detroit products are the Edsel, a technologically conservative design disaster, and the technologically inventive but equally disastrous Corvair. It was rumored that this air-cooled, rear-engine car was so precariously balanced that with the least provocation it would turn tail and slide down the freeway backwards. Peltzer, of course, drives a Corvair.

But the middle Americans themselves are transformed into elements of corruption to be inspected and dissected under Dante's surgical scalpel. Dory's tavern, first occupied by the denizens of the town is later invaded and occupied by the horrible horde of Gremlins. But they do little more than the original occupants: they drink, play pool, smoke, play cards, party, and so on. They do nothing more than the town's folks, but they do so in burlesque. They don't smoke one cigarette but three at a time; they play cards and shoot each other for cheating. They shoot down a B-17 bomber. So, the "normal" activities of the town are also dissected by Dante through the means of inflation, a *reducto ad absurdum* that unfortunately doesn't strike us as absurd but frightening.

There is little need to go on. Almost every scene in this film is filled to overflowing with direct or symbolic comments on our culture. It feels as if Dante thought he had but this single chance to state of feelings about the ills of society and wanted to make sure he touched all the bases. The film is almost over-wrought, manic in its headlong plunge into social critique; this over-kill may be one of it faults.

The form in which this shot-gun social criticism is enfolded is far more difficult to describe than the content itself. Viewers typically feel disoriented – critics have said the film doesn't make sense. It has been accused of being disjointed, of making preposterous jumps, and of being unoriginal. But the concept that continuity and originality are positive values is an idea that we inherited from a 19th century movement in art that has been called Modernism. These have, at least in the world of Art, been seriously questioned of late. Let us take a moment and quickly survey the origins of Modernism

and see how it may have gone wrong. Perhaps we can come up with some ideas to help us analyze this odd film.

Photography, introduced in the middle of the 19th Century, caused a major crisis in the world of art. Before photography, the value of art was judged by how close it came to the subject being portrayed. This is the old Greek idea of mimesis: The purpose of art is to imitate nature, the better the imitation, the better the art. Another common measure of the value of art was how much labor went into it. However, photography threw the monkey wrench into the mimesis business because it could do this better than any other medium with considerably less effort. Thus, two great ideological mainstays of the art world had to be thrown in the trash: degree of imitation and degree of difficulty.

Willingly or unwillingly, photography released art from the burden of laboriously imitating nature. Since photography could render better than any artists, true artists must find other goals. The following century-long art movement was broadly enclosed under an umbrella labeled "Modernism." One of the varied pursuits of Modernism was to find the true essence of art. This almost alchemical process was undertaken by a process of elimination. What could be removed from, for instance, a painting and still have it remain "Art?" Photography was, in a sense, the kick-off in the reductivist rush to the goal line of "Pure Art." For the next century art was preoccupied with the "removal gap." The Impressionists removed detailed representation. The Cubists removed perspective and single points of view. The Futurists removed the notion of unique time. The Ash Can School removed nobility. The Abstract Expressionists removed subject matter. Other movements removed frames, rectangular canvases, the value of artist's materials, and so on. Ultimately the physical art object itself was removed with the advent of so-called Conceptual Art.

Well, obviously Modernism was a blind alley. Once everything has been eliminated, there is nothing left to remove. Having thus achieved their goal, masses of artist would be faced with permanent unemployment. This actually happened. According to some writers it happened sometime in the 1970's. Rather than face retirement, artist opted to jump ship. And what would one call the new movement that would follow Modernism? Why, Post- Modernism, of course.

Some of the tenants of post-Modernism are very relevant to *Gremlins*. While post-Modernism is right now in a state of flux, some characteristics seem to be jelling our of a verbal and artistic fog that surrounds anything new in art. For instant, the typical post-Modern feels that everything that can be invented in the art world has already been invented. Therefore, creativity and originality are no longer to be valued. One of the faces of the Post-Modern is that artists mine the past for ideas, quote these, and combine them in new ways. The invention comes in the act of combining, not in the act of origination. Art is an act of investigation rather than invention. These artists are often described, quite positively, as compulsive trash collectors.

Now, *Gremlins* is a post-Modern film harnessed for the purposes of social criticism.

The film begins with scenes we've all seen before. *Gremlins* starts with a flashback to Chinatown – a metaphor for that part of town where the normal rules of nature, law, and conduct do not hold. (Perhaps this applies to filmmaking itself.) This was the basic metaphor of Roman Polanski's film *Chinatown* [1974]. This Chinatown is occupied by seemingly World War II sailors and their "girls," by rickshaws occupied by nuns, by mist and fog, and by Americanizing red, white, and blue colored lights. What Chinatown in America could this be? More than anything else, it resembles a set for a musical number for Fred Astaire. There is no attempt at reality; there is, however, a strong attempt to invoke our previous filmic experiences.

The references to other films get co-mingled with self- references in ways that are sometimes obvious and sometimes obscure. The Chinese character[1] at the entrance to a shop reads, "Evil Spirit." It is pronounced "Ma." A famous Japanese film that is a collection of ghost stories is titled *Kwaidan* [1964]. The first part of that names seems etymologically related to the Chinese "Gwai."[2] If we combine these two ideograms, we get Chinese for "demons and monsters; fiends" – Moguai!

Grandfather's candle-lit, low-tech store, where Peltzer looks for an appropriate gift for his son – perhaps the future of America – is downstairs. He must descend into the unconscious to find answers to his problems. This film is unusual in that this is the only "basement scene." By contrast, Peltzer's workshop is not where we would expect it to be – also in the basement, that traditional location of invention. His is upstairs! Perhaps the American inventive drive has become too logical, too controlled. Peltzer's motto is, "Fantastic ideas for a fantastic world; makes the illogical logical." So in this film, the Oriental is posited in the unconscious while the Occidental is in the conscious.

With Gizmo we again have a disruption in form and content. The content, as we soon find out, is a vicious monster. But the from is the cute and cuddly Gizmo. "Gizmo" is as word of unknown origin that basically means "gadget." Is one of the messages of the film that within every innocent gadget, those things which our technological culture produces to make our lives "easier," lurks a monster that, given the chance, will readily destroy us?

One of the characteristics of the Post-Modern era is that the audience is expected to be steeped in media culture. We're all expected to have watched a lot of TV and seen a lot of films. We're expected to be normal, not high-brow sophisticates who'd never admit to watching TV or seeing anything but foreign films. This film never stops referring to other films - directly in the visualization of what we see on the screen and less directly in its plot elements. An example of the latter is how economics is viewed.

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[1] The Sino Chinese-English Dictionary, NY: Sino Pub. Co., 1980, p. 259.

[2] Ibid., p. 131.

Let's return to Chinatown. Here, in this area of formalized strangeness, we meet the two patriarchs – one stereotypically Oriental and the other equally stereotypically Occidental. However, there are similarities between them – mainly, neither is competent to support his family; both are seemingly blinded by distorted economic values. In their own way, each are equally ineffectual. Peltzer tries to sell everything to everyone while Grandfather sells nothing. The youth, symbolic of the activity of the younger generation, bridges the gap and makes the sale – the impulsive material greed of the youth, albeit heart felt, is what displaces great forces and temporarily places nature out of control. Thus, it is economics in the 1980's that causes dislocations in the natural order in much the same way that radiation or atomic fallout did in the Fifties films like *Them!* [1954], or *The Incredible Shrinking Man* [1957], or *Attack of the 50 Foot Woman* [1958]. Just as these films of the 1950's were materializations of the fears about nuclear dangers, so *Gremlins* is a study in contemporary, heartland economic-based paranoias.

The setting of *Gremlins* has a very Capra-esque quality to it. The locale, the season, the town, and even in some ways the action makes *Gremlins* seem like a sick-joke remake of *It's a Wonderful Life*. In both films, one of the major antagonists owns a bank. Both films celebrate the value that a single person can have on the life of a small town. We even see clips of the classic bit of Capra-corn on the TV while Mother is chopping onions. Is her crying a resonance to the old-fashioned emotionality in *It's a Wonderful Life* [1946], or are her tear ducts merely chemically stimulated? The comparison makes the differences between the films even more striking. While Capra is renowned for his ultimately positive attitude toward the American populace, Dante seems to have nothing good to say about anybody or anything.

So, if Dante is our ultimate social misanthrope, if he truly hates everything about him, what does he believe in? He wouldn't be making films if he didn't believe in anything. Where are his values? It seems that the only thing that this film is true to is film itself. Dante quotes profusely from a myriad of films: *It's a Wonderful Life*; *Forbidden Planet* [1956] (Robbie the Robot appears at the inventor's convention); *The Time Machine* [1960] where George Pal's marvelous interpretation of 19th century science appears in the background behind Robbie the Robot; in the department store, Stripe hides among very media oriented dolls (Sylvester, Bugs Bunny, E.T., etc.); *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* [1977] (the working title of that film, "Watch the Skies" which is in turn taken from the last line of *The Thing from Another World* [1951] appears on the marquee of the theater and Steven Spielberg himself appears in a cameo at the inventor's conference as a person with the broken foot watching himself on video in a motorized golf cart). The children in the film attend Charles Martin Jones Jr. High School – a reference to Chuck Jones animator and director of the best Daffy Duck, Bugs Bunny and Wile E. Coyote cartoons. *Gremlins* is a film within film within film.

Perhaps the quote that most reveals Dante's attitude toward film is a piece of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* [1953] seen on TV. Don Segal, the director of the original 1953 version of the film, foresaw it with a very dark, ambiguous ending. The doctor, Kevin McCarthy, would be seen last standing in the middle of a busy freeway, cars unceasingly flashing past him, desperately trying to flag down someone to whom to tell

his story. Everyone ignored him; the invaders would successfully take over the world. The studio, however, felt that this downbeat and depressing ending would not help the audiences relate to the film and forced him to tack on a happier, more up-beat ending.

Anyway, back to *Gremlins*. Dante has the hero of the film watching *Invasion* on late-night TV and what we apparently see is Segal's original ending. What we have is not only a quote, but a restoration of a science-fiction masterpiece, seen on TV, within another film, which parallels the action of the film we are watching. If nothing else, Dante believes in film.

There are many references to other films well hidden within *Gremlins*. Not the least of these are minor figures in the cast. For instance, Keye Luke plays the Chinese grandfather; he also played Charlie Chan's Number One son in 13 of the 46 Chan mysteries. The man who plays the "straight man" in the science film-within- the-film shown to the high school class is Hugh Marlowe. He played the Judas figure, Tom Stevens, in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* [1951]. He also appeared in *Earth Versus the Flying Saucers* [1956] and several other science fiction and horror films. It is interesting that Dante chose him to appear in a non-horror, non- science fiction role – again turning the world upside down.

One of the "films-within-the-film" is a direct reference and satire on "E.T." As you recall, in *E.T.* the alien does what the classic couch potato does: watches TV while drinking beer. In his alcoholic stupor, he telepathically projects what he is seeing on the screen onto Elliott. He is watching the portion of *The Quiet Man* [1952] where John Wayne kisses Maureen O'Hara. The result is that much to his embarrassment, Elliott uncontrollably kisses a girl in his high school class. Even within "*E.T.*" there is a bit of a filmic reversal – having seen many of his cowboy and war films, we don't normally think of John Wayne as a romantic lead. He is known – from *Stagecoach* [1939] to *The Green Berets* [1968] – primarily for his physicality and not his emotionality.

Joe Dante reverses all this. Gizmo is also watching TV. However, he is watching the 1950 film, *To Please a Lady* [1950]. Note the careful interrelation of the titles: *The Quiet Man* [1952] vs. *To Please a Lady*. In this unremarkable film, one appropriately relegated to late-night TV, Clark Gable plays a heel race-car driver and, in the scene we see, kisses Barbara Stanwyck. The kiss is the relation to E.T., but there the resemblances stop, and the reversals begin. Clark Gable is traditionally known in movie lore as a lady's man and a macho man, but not one who is characterized by mechanistically involved physical roles such as race car drivers. He floats in our imaginations more as a swashbuckler on the high seas or in a different era, or as an adventurer in primitive environments. In *E.T.* we have the physical man – John Wayne – In a love scene; in *Gremlins* we have the lover – Clark Gable – In a physical scene. Chalk up another reversal to Mr. Dante.

Another aspect of post-Modern film that must be mentioned is the slippery use of time and space. In this film we constantly begin scenes during the day, for instance the

schoolteacher is killed after letting school out – about 3 pm we assume – and within minutes are outside at night.

The death of Stripe, in a Baptismal font-like fountain, struck by daylight, cannot but bring to mind the endless death by dissolution of Count Dracula. How many times have we seen the undead and miserable Count finally returning to eternal peace he has so long sought through the action of the searing, decaying, but liberating God-given light? So too Stripe is struck down. The water that allowed the evil within the good to escape, the Gremlin escaping from within the Magwai, much like the elixir that separated Mr. Hyde from Dr. Jekyll, that same water when combined with light, resurrects order and peace.

It is interesting that the resolution of the film, the usual conquest of good over evil, is also couched in post-Modern terms. Gizmo, only because of his exposure to film and TV, knows what to do to save the hero and kill the villain. The media become the source of knowledge, the reservoir of moral values, the repository of necessary skills. Just as in *Short Circuit* [1986], where a robot is struck by lightning and is thought to "be alive," life is defined by the ability to appropriately quote TV and film characters. Here the hero, symbolically named after mechanistic gadgets, Gizmo, conquers his evil other self by the influence of the media. Ultimately it is post-Modernism itself that in *Gremlins* saves the day.

If, as I propose, this film is not about the invasions of Gremlins into Middle America, but the invasion of foreign products, what about American products. We have the ode to "Virginia Harvester" tractors that our War Veteran drive to and from Dory's tavern. We have Peltzer's pathetic inventions. But there is another, far more interesting entry into the race for supremacy between American and foreign products.

During the first half of the film the Gremlins are in their ascendancy; during the second half they decline into final annihilation. Their rise is marked by their invasion of the average American home, their multiplication and the occupation of the town. Their decline consists of their mass destruction while watching a Disney film follow by the all-American one-on-one battle between Billy and Stripe. Between the ascent and the fall, we have a very subtle turning point.

The first sign of the defeat of the Gremlins happens in, appropriately, Dory's tavern. The harassed waitress is demonically assaulted on all sides when suddenly she discovers the Gremlin's susceptibility to bright lights. She manages to escape their clutches by popping some flash cubes into their ugly little faces and getting away with Billy. This is the turning point in the film. Within the popular mind, all cameras are foreign (Nikon, Cannon, Minolta, Pentax, etc.) except one – Polaroid: Made In America. This is the weapon that finally turns the tables on the Gremlins, Invented and initially promoted by a single heroic personality, Dr. Land, the Polaroid Camera is the positive side of Billy's inept father. This, I believe, tells us that there is still hope for American inventiveness – one of the few positive moments in this sadly depressing film.