

Chapter 1

The Evil Dead Franchise: Building Genre Hybridity

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ABSTRACT

In the early 1980s, Sam Raimi's feature The Evil Dead inaugurated a horror-film franchise that would become a trademark of pop culture. The movie originated four other feature films, a TV series and videogames. The franchise set its importance in film culture by actively including humor through the use of different visual, sound, and narrative resources. Such narrative and stylistic construction would later be essential for the development of the TV series and would be later subverted in the more recent film projects linked to The Evil Dead. This chapter aims to examine how film genre codes work within The Evil Dead's cinematic language and script, focusing primarily on the original trilogy directed by Sam Raimi—The Evil Dead (1979), Evil Dead 2 (1987), and Army of Darkness (1992)—therefore clarifying how the hybridization of film genres is developed in The Evil Dead franchise, contributing to its cult status.

INTRODUCTION

At the dawn of the 1980s, Sam Raimi's first feature *The Evil Dead* inaugurates a film franchise that would go on to become a trademark of pop culture. Starting as a low-budget, independent endeavor of a group of young friends with aesthetic ambitions and sensible commercial insights, this project would later become a cult classic. The original *Evil Dead* would be followed by three other feature films – a fifth is set to theatrical release in April 2023 – and a TV series.

This long-lasting existence is not atypical for horror projects, as shown by the numerous sequels and spin-offs of *Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Child's Play*, or *Friday the 13th*. The serial model seems to be the rule for horror films, capitalizing on the success of the first picture and enjoying direct-to-video, DVD, or more recently, streaming distribution, if a theatrical release proves to be too costly.

Inheriting from the new horror trend inaugurated by George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1967) and followed by gory, slasher titles such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974) or *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978), *The Evil Dead's* originality lies in the radical shift of tone in

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the original trilogy, both within the films and among themselves, openly mixing horror, comedy, and adventure. Furthermore, *The Evil Dead* is an exception among horror film franchises, since the most recognizable and recurrent character is not the monster, but the hero Ash, played by Bruce Campbell in each installment.

The *Evil Dead* franchise set its importance in film culture by actively and intentionally - or not, as we'll see - including humor through the use of different visual, sound, and narrative resources. This chapter examines how comedy codes work within *The Evil Dead*'s cinematic language and script, focusing primarily on the original trilogy directed by Sam Raimi - *The Evil Dead* (1979), *Evil Dead 2* (1987), and *Army of Darkness* (1992). The shift from horror into hybrid film genres is largely carried by the developments around Ash, the (anti)hero protagonist and the defining face of the franchise. Such narrative and stylistic construction would later be essential for the development of the TV series and subverted in the more recent film projects linked to *The Evil Dead*. I aim to clarify how the hybridization of film genres developed in *The Evil Dead* franchise, playing out to become the key to its success. I'll focus primarily on two elements: the narrative arcs involving Ash and the use of some generic conventions to convey the tone of each installment. While genre mixing or hybridity is not new and is rarely recognized by critics, it is fully embraced by the industry, which aims to reach an audience as wide as possible. Therefore, we will keep in mind the film industry's broader developments when approaching genre hybridity in *The Evil Dead*.

The methodological choice orienting this research echoes Rick Altman's (2000, p.14) assertion that film genre theorists do not tend to consider film genres are purely textual, relating them to the industry's trends and audience's expectations. In other words, film genre discussions include visual and narrative text, spectators' reactions, and the industry's imperatives. While *The Evil Dead* distinguishes itself from other movie franchises, by achieving long-lasting success in different media, textual analysis is essential for understanding how film genres' tropes are mixed and subverted to keep *The Evil Dead* relevant to the audience. In addition, moviegoers, as research shows, often cite a film's story and genre as decisive factors when choosing which film to watch, even though they are rarely able to consistently define a film's genre (Austin, 1989). Therefore, taking a closer look at the films' textual elements is pertinent, since narrative not only engenders constitutive elements of film genres, but as David Bordwell (1985) puts it, it is a process that leads to achieving specific effects on an audience.

THE ORIGINAL TRILOGY: WORKING WITHIN PERSONAL AFFINITIES, PRODUCTION LIMITATIONS, AND GENRE TRENDS

While remaining rich sources for well-researched production information and industry anecdotes about *The Evil Dead*, Bill Warren's *The Evil Dead Companion* (2001) and John Kenneth Muir's *The Unseen Force: The films of Sam Raimi* (2004) do not provide in-depth analysis of the films' narratives and grammar, nor include them in the broader industry scenario at the time of production. A more interesting view is provided by Kate Egan, in the volume dedicated to *The Evil Dead* (2011). However, Egan's analysis is limited to the first film, focusing primarily on the construction of its cult status. Moreover, discussions do not include the more recent installments of the franchise, such as *The Evil Dead* reboot (2013) or the series *Ash vs Evil Dead*.

The story behind the origins of *The Evil Dead* is, above all, a tale of friendship leading to the making of films. In the 1970s, a group of youngsters formed by Bruce Campbell, Josh Becker, John Cameron,

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