

# ***Anaconda*, a Snakes and Ladders Game. Horror Film and the Notions of Stereotype, Fun and Play.**

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I commence this paper with a review of the film *Anaconda* (Louis Llosa, 1997) written by Louise Blanchard of *Le Journal de Montreal*. This review inspired the reflections upon which my paper is based.

At the movies, fear always pays.

A giant Amazonian snake slithers across our screen... thanks to cameras of director Luis Llosa that has sought it out in its area of play in the equatorial forest.

If you have, as I do, a phobia for snakes, nothing in this film will make you feel any better. Neither will knowing it is an artificial snake, or making the observation that it is a bad film. If you are anything like me, it won't be five minutes before you have your hands over your eyes and both feet pulled up on your seat.

Nevertheless, the plot is heart-rendingly banal: a small film crew goes into the Amazon to seek images of a mythical Indian tribe. They come across an ancient priest, recycled as a snake hunter, who ensnares the crew, and throws it into the wide opened mouth of a giant anaconda. Guess the rest...

Though there is an impressive line-up of good looking actors, the film does not succeed in rising above the commonplace and stereotypical. Since it exploits all the well-worn recipes of horror films — including music that keeps ones nerves on edge !!! — everything becomes perfectly foreseeable. «And a double burger for the anaconda», we are saying to ourselves as we watch a couple going into the forest.

But that does not prevent the film from being excessively frightening for sensitive souls [BLANCHARD, 1997, freely translated and I'm underlining].

The newspaper review quoted above, which resembles many others that address genre films, is paradoxical. On one hand, as a spectator, Blanchard testifies to the efficiency of *Anaconda*. The thriller horror film is scary, so much so as to be unsuitable for sensitive souls. On the other hand, the «nevertheless» of the fourth paragraph introduces the distance of the film critic, distance that allows her to expose the banality of the plot and the use of stereotypes. It is not often possible for

critics to appreciate a genre film without *confessing* to the pleasures it provides.<sup>1</sup> Academic film criticism has not adopted a different attitude. As R.L. Rutsky and Justin Wyatt have effectively demonstrated in «Serious Pleasures: Cinematic Pleasure and the Notion of Fun» [1990], academic discourse distinguishes between the corrupt pleasures of entertainment and the more acceptable intellectual and moral pleasures that legitimate its own (superior) position of knowledge and power. A generalized negative attitude towards the stereotypical is reflected by the importance granted to the notion of *second degré*.

To take one's place to the *second degré*, is to distance oneself from vulgarity, the healthy and simple consumption of which does not allow for recognition of the subtlety of critical lucidity. It is to face stereotypes that one can avoid only by showing that one is not a dupe. (...) The *premier degré* provides its simple joys only at the price of perpetual mystification. The *second degré* insures that one devotes oneself to the subtle pleasures of the deconstruction and denunciation [AMOSSY, 1991: 78, freely translated].

It is precisely those aforementioned simple joys that interest me. I will not, here, examine, and deconstruct stereotypes, to ultimately formulate a value judgement. Rather, I wish to study the way these «pictures in the head» condition the interaction between the spectator and the genre film. Therefore, I will discuss stereotypes<sup>2</sup> directly, *au premier degré*. As it will become apparent throughout this paper, the horror or terror film lends itself very well to such analysis.

### **The Fun of the Filmic Game**

Any serious discussion about the notion of fun could not be endeavoured without the study of play and games. Interestingly, dealing with the industrialization of fear, Ruth Amossy associates the fiction of terror to play and games. By not hiding its coded nature, the «art to frighten» is put forward openly as a

ludic activity [1991: 36]. This relation between the stereotype and the ludic allows one to form a base for an analogy interrelating cinema, play and games, an analogy I previously established [PERRON, 1997 and 1999] and wish to recapitulate briefly here so as to underpin my line of reasoning.

According to the Huizinga's famous definition:

play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is "different" from "ordinary life" [(1938) 1955: 28].

Obvious parallels emerge between this definition and cinema. Most importantly, a spectator engages freely in this form of entertainment<sup>3</sup>. He enters the theatre in a mind state propitious to the filmic game, he arrives ready to play<sup>4</sup>. Granted, one does not participate in a game without knowing some rules, and the spectator must be familiar with those of narrative cinema. Drawing upon the system introduced by Peter Rabinowitz [1987], I propose a system of four meta-rules functioning in concert and applicable, flexibly, to narrative cinema:

- 1) Rule of notice: the spectator must be all eyes and all ears, paying attention to every element presented in a manner more or less ostensive or obvious.
- 2) Rule of signification: sharing more or less globally the cognitive environment of the film, the spectator must evaluate the narrative significance of images and sounds directed towards his/her senses and extract some consequences from them to understand the plot.
- 3) Rule of configuration: presented elements are not supposed to be disparate. The spectator has to place them upon a horizon of expectations or in a general and/or generic schema so as to be able to predict the continuation of the film.
- 4) Rule of coherence: facing global reorganization, and the end of the film, the spectator has to palliate the indeterminate areas left in the narrative (gaps, blanks, disjunctions, etc.) to make sure that all elements are compatible, linked and in harmony.

In order for the spectator to participate in the filmic game, he or she has to be able to focus their attention (rule 1) on elements possessing certain narrative meaning (rule 2) so as to understand

the story, to formulate hypotheses regarding the plot (rule 3) and to make links between narrative elements (rule 4).

Insofar as genre films respect the causal logic of the action (in contrast to “serious” films, often overcomplicated, unreliable and capable of opening up permanent gaps), they depend a great deal on the rule of configuration. As social psychologists and cognitivists have demonstrated, simplification and generalization are inherent to the intellectual activity of the mind. Stereotyping is one of these activities. Generic and general schemata are fundamental structures of expectation. It’s really to schemata, conventions and configurations that one refers to when discussing «certain seemingly inviolable rules entrenched across genres» of the Hollywood cinema (one of these primary rules is that the protagonist/hero does not die) [GRANT, 1986: 8] as well as to rules of a particular genre (to survive an horror movie, as the self-reflexive *Scream* [1996] states, you cannot have a sex, you can never drink or do drugs and you never say “I’ll be right back”). It is therefore not the presence of schemata and stereotypes inside a known framework that it is necessary to analyze, it is their articulation. It is preposterous to write as Blanchard did that *Anaconda* was predictable and that it employed a known formula. Even before they sit in the film theatre, cultural mediators (trailers, advertisement, promotion and of course... film reviews!) have allowed the audience to infer the plot. A genre film in itself is a ready-made narrative form that is repeated with some variations so as to sustain the interest, and with some technical innovations in order to better impress and surprise. According to Vera Dika’s conclusions about slasher films, «[t]his technique allows the viewer to feel secure in his knowledge of the formula, distanced by the formulaic predictability of the events, while nonetheless excited by the surprises and variations» [1990: 84]. Amossy writes, «[it] is the force of the repetition within the diversity that insures the effect of the stereotype of fear» [1991: 132, freely translated]<sup>5</sup>. This repetition promotes the instigation of the game between the genre film

and the spectator. It provides the latter with knowledge of the genre, introducing

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a distance fundamental to the game. Here I do not mean a *second degré* critical distance. Rather, the more or less astute knowledge of rules and stereotypes of the horror film allows us to perceive some variations<sup>6</sup>. Again, as Amossy notes, it is not a question of saying the spectator expressly compares the film to a game, and tries as I do to trace parallels. It is instead that the spectator possesses a diffuse conscience, nonetheless powerful, of the ludic nature of plots based on fear [1991: 139]. The spectator going to see a monster film such as *Anaconda* consequently adopts a gaming attitude, knowing that the film will reaffirm his pleasures within the genre, respect the rules of terror, and play on his expectations. That's where the fun lies!

### **The Pawns of *Anaconda***

The importance granted to stereotypes in a monster film such as *Anaconda* is undeniable. Since one cannot speak about stereotypes without entering the domain of social science, and more precisely of social cognition, I will begin to account for *Anaconda*'s characters from the salient features (physical and psychological) that have been underlined in the hundred of film reviews that I consulted<sup>7</sup>. Amossy writes that stereotype is «[a] grid that the human mind applies on the world for a better involvement in it» [1991: 24, freely translated]. I thought it would be appropriate to introduce the pawns in grid form (figure 1).

Straight off, the monster integrates itself into the third category of objects of terror indexed by Amossy [1991: 131]<sup>8</sup>. It is a reptile that arouses fear or phobia. Via dialogue and the *mise en scène*, it undergoes a hyperbolic treatment. As for the humans, actors and actresses

trigger in the spectator's mind a configuration associated with their status. In 1997, the film careers of both Jennifer Lopez and Ice Cube were in full ascension (incidentally, their names come first in the opening credits). John Voight and Eric Stolz were established stars, while the other actors were still unknown. As the features, characteristics and epithets listed above demonstrate, the characters of *Anaconda* are two-dimensional cardboard cut-outs. The spectator learns very little about them. He only knows their names, their (stereo)types and their relationships: Steven the anthropologist and Terri the director are lovers, the director is friends with Danny the cameraman, Gary the soundman sleeps with Denise the production manager (the film takes care to emphasize the idea of sex in their relationship), Mateo the captain is Serone's accomplice, etc. No need to extrapolate at length on this «snake's skewer» (easy return to *premier degré*). It's not a question of knowing the characters better, but just to go along with them during the roller-coaster ride in the Amazonian forest. Everyone knows very well that it will not be easy, for instance, to deal with Westridge the narrator, a pompous prima donna, a British stereotype who is a fastidious, snooty, world-weary sophisticate, a golf nut and opera lover, annoying, stinker, stiff-upper-lip, uptight, whining, and stuck-up. It is then completely normal that these «wooden personalities are incapable of exciting our imagination or our sympathy [and that by] the time the carnage starts, we're strangely detached from the would-be heroes» [BERARDINELLI, 1997]. The characters of *Anaconda* represent gaming pieces, the pawns that are going to be moved by the director in order to make, in their turn, the spectator move around in the narrative.

### **Snakes and Ladders**

The displacement of pawns will nevertheless be made within a well circumscribed space. Louise Blanchard has intuitively designated acknowledged it while speaking about the «area of

play of the equatorial forest». Thus, the diegesis of *Anaconda* constitutes the first dimension of the playground. But this playground exceeds the sole spatial limits.

The progress of the game is not purely fortuitous, and the public expects that some “moves” mark out the itinerary of fear. (...) [The] threatening interruptions [by objects of fear] in the daily universe and adventures that ensue are, also, meticulously programmed according to known rules. One thinks of those games where the participants have, with throws of dice, to cross a perilous space sown with ambushes until reaching the square of final resolution.

If, therefore, the imitative reality is not defined by precise rules, the precise delineation of the terrors

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	Actress/actor	Film career in 1997	Generic order	Character	Race	Profession	Features, characteristics and epithets
in couple	Jennifer Lopez	rising	1	Terri Flores	Hispano-American	director	beautiful, pretty, gorgeous, Latine fireball, shapely, hard body, smart, strong, courageous, determined, sparky, first-timer, earnest, bumfuzzled, though, luscious, logical
	Eric Stolz	established	4	Dr. Steven Cale	White American	anthropologist	sexy, handsome, self-assured, cocky, doofus, sensitive, snicker, boring, heroic, pale, smart, scwany, rational, intelligent, likeable
	Ice Cube	rising	2	Danny Rich	Afro-American	cameraman	taciturn, home boy though, good-hearted, gang dude, cynical homeboy, street wise, wise-cracking, gangsta
	Jonathan Hyde	still unknown	5	Warren Westridge	White English	narrator	high-class, damned, pompous prima donna, fastidious, snooty, world-weary sophisticated, golf nut and opera lover, annoying, stinker, wuss guy, stiff-upper-lip, British stereotype, uptigh, whining, stock uppity
in couple	Kari Wuhrer	still unknown	7	Denise Kalberg	White American	production manager	pretty, frail, scared-silly, perky, bimbo, gullible blonde, air headed sex-kitten, stupid blonde, sex-crazed, hottie, delectable, disco-livin' wanton, voluptuous
	Owen Wilson	still unknown	6	Gary Dixon	White American	soundman	handsome, dumb tow-head, scrade witless, horny, pothead, dude, surfer dude, sex-crazed, stoner-like
	John Voight	established	3	Paul Serone	Hispanic from Paraguay	ex-priest, professional snake hunter	shady, intelligent, machiavellian, evil snake, villainous, obsessed, excessive, perverse, shady, nutcase, cliché-spouting, wild, nasty, freaky weird, typical river rat, mysterious, stranger, whached-out, hammy villain, sinister, insufferable, snaky, maniacal, bad, creepy dude, evil man, devious, slimy, wiggly
	Vincent Castellanos	unknown	8	Mateo	Native, Hispanic from Peru	river boat captain	shady, sinister, swarthy, sullen, inexplicably menacing
				ANACONDA	snake	monster predator	“machine to kill”, voracious, dreaded, frightening, nasty, lean, mean, big, long, vigorous, beautiful, never-tiring, deadly, cool piece of shockdom

**FIGURE 1**

will bring some to bear. It is the grid of the laws of terror applied on daily and banal scenery, or at least on what is claimed to be real, that produces the narrative of terror [AMOSSY, 1991: 138, freely translated].

This “grid of the laws of terror” Amossy speaks of and the moves she refers to evoke a game board. In a web review, underneath a picture of John Voight bitten by the anaconda while climbing a ladder, Scott Hamilton and Chris Holland wrote: “When a game of Snakes and Ladders goes really, really wrong” [2000]. It appears to me the comparison with Snakes and Ladders goes deeper than this obvious one-liner. We introduced the rules of the game and the pawns, now it is time to discuss the moves executed by the director and the spectator on the familiar playground that is the ready-made narrative of the horror film (figure 2). The spectator knows that, as with a classical plot structure, the journey will lead from the departure square to a happy final resolution, via a sinuous course comprising gains and losses. This is the path game’s distinguishing feature. This grid also emphasizes the idea that if the unfolding of a film is linear, proceeding forward relentlessly, the perception and cognition of the spectator is «rather a Brownian movement. [It] progresses by jumps, flashbacks, lateral drifts, expectations and superimpositions, not by caprice or reading inconsequence but by attention to the textual framework» [GARDIES, 1993: 170, freely translated]. The spectator is therefore set up to move pawns on the game board.<sup>9</sup>

I distinguish the two types of displacement that the game is able to carry out by way of narrative information, which is the pawn of fiction. In the first place, there are ladder-displacements that make the characters advance rapidly and the narrative progresses by a leap. These are displacements that confirm the spectator’s hypotheses. They proceed from the respect of the rules of the game and from a schematization observed at several levels. At the formal level for instance, brought to the attention of the spectator in a close shot and supported by a suitable

music, the first suspicious look that is exchanged between captain Mateo and Serone who just climbed on board and asked to be dropped off at the next village (square 7), allows their complicity to be foreshadowed. A newspaper clipping showing the captain photographed with Serone and the man who was eaten at the beginning of the film will definitively confirm suspicions (square 41). At the level of character, Steven the anthropologist remains, through his knowledge, the only one able to pit himself against Serone and his plan. A small poisonous wasp placed in a diving tube allows him to be put out of any position where he could be harmful. However, Steven, the good scientist — incarnated, in addition, by a known actor, Stolz — could not die. This is then why we leave him “to sleep” (square 24) the greatest part of the film and why, via ladder-displacement, we can come to wake him up precisely at the moment when it is necessary it to save Danny from Serone (square 76). Stereotypes here are truly narrative shortcuts that provide an excuse to take care of other more captivating matters than, in this case, a man sick in bed. At the level of the causal chain of events, the logic of the genre and the rule of configuration are respected. Insofar as Gary the soundman talks about sex with Denise the production manager (square 6), one has little difficulty imagining in which situation the couple will end up (square 14). Gary converses, in private, at night, with Serone (square 48) and the spectator anticipates their association (square 51). The loss of gallons of gasoline (square 35) caused by the explosion of the bridge is not an insignificant or harmless incident. It is going to force Terri and Danny to make a fuel stop, leading right into Serone’s snake trap (square 78). The bite of the baby snake (square 37) is a foreshadowing of the narrator’s destiny (square 68). Finally, when Serone disappears underwater after his combat with Terri and Steven, who just woke up (square 77), the spectator very easily guesses that he can not die so foolishly. After a lull, he reappears in his snake trap so as to re-launch the action (square 79). All these ladders-displacements (as the snake-displacements) obviously have to be confirmed by the narrative.

The longer the ladder, the longer before

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FIGURE 2

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the spectator's expectations are corroborated.

The second type of displacement, the snake-displacements, is naturally connected to the appearance of the monster. The first function of this displacement, identified by red snakes, is to eliminate pawns that no longer have a role to play in the narrative, thus revealing their true role in this fiction : to be eaten by a giant snake. Not a member of the film crew, and moreover an

accomplice of Serone, the captain Mateo is the first to die (squares 44-42). Accomplice in his turn, Gary the soundman is then swallowed by the anaconda (squares 56-54). Denise the production manager tries to avenge her boyfriend but is strangled by Serone (squares 64-63). Westridge the narrator, annoying for the rest of the crew, meets the same fate as Mateo and Gary (squares 69-65), a ladder-displacement (squares 37-63) having led to his death. As fits the rules of evil, Serone is the last one eaten (then regurgitated) (squares 86-81). And finally, a rather long scene is devoted to the death of the second anaconda which Terri and Danny obviously eliminate (squares 97-89). Dead pawns do not disappear from the game board since they remain in the spectator's memory. Snakes-displacements end on the square where their death was played.

Here, the stereotyping of characters exerts its full power, playing with the spectator's expectations. The fate of Danny the Black cameraman is meant to put the anticipations of the spectator off track. He is the first of the film crew to jump in the water (square 39) and to be shown in the water while a suspicious tracking shot comes toward him (square 40). He stays in the water and goes back to get Mateo (square 45) even though the anaconda has just killed the captain. Nevertheless, he gets back on the boat alive (square 47). Later, although he is thrown into the water after Westridge's death, he is again saved by his friend Terri, who kills the anaconda (squares 73-70). As a reviewer pointed out<sup>10</sup>, *Anaconda* plays with a rule of configuration, the Roger Ebert's BADF action movie rule ("The Brother Always Dies First")<sup>11</sup>. This illustrates the second function of the snakes-displacements, identified in blue. These lead the spectator astray by playing with the (non) presence of the anaconda, in most cases to better delay the disappearance of a pawn. That's why the pawns are going back on the game board. As Blanchard notes in her review, upon seeing Gary and Denise leave into the dark forest (square 13), the spectator clearly sees them as a «double burger for the anaconda». Yet, Blanchard doesn't mention (herself playing the game!?) that the anaconda does not actually appear in this

scene. The subjective point of view that rapidly advances toward the couple, paired with grunts on the soundtrack, is in fact a wild boar that Serone kills (square 18). During that scene, one might even think that Serone is going to shoot Denise (square 17). It appears that Blanchard got caught up in the game. Again, at this point *Anaconda* breaks two of the DON'T rules of the classic horror film: you don't do drugs and can never have sex, especially in the middle of the creepy Amazon forest. Snakes-displacements serve to lengthen the life-course of pawns and additionally to give the much craved emotional roller-coaster ride to the spectator. It is not the anaconda that gets Steven under water when he is going to release the propeller (square 20), but the poisonous wasp placed in his diving tube. Gary the soundman also betrays our expectations while diving to install the dynamite under the bridge that blocks the way to the boat (square 29). Although a point of view at water level moves towards him and something moving underwater presupposes the presence of the anaconda, Gary is finally pulled unharmed out of the river by Serone (square 32). This scene of the explosion of the bridge does therefore not lead to a sudden appearance of the giant snake. It is only at the end of film that the anaconda makes its most sudden appearance, respecting another rule of configuration of the horror film: while we think Terri has finally killed it, it suddenly reappears, from under the wharf, for a final attack (squares 95-96). A very effective snake-displacement occurs when it's time to deal with Serone, the other bad guy of the film. After the death of Gary, Terri goes to meet Serone in the captain's cabin and tries to seduce him. While they kiss (square 58), Danny comes up behind in order to nail Serone.

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But the latter sees the cameraman in a mirror (square 59) and stops him at the point of his revolver. While Serone repeats that he is not stupid (and the spectator agrees, knowing that villains rarely fall into this kind of trap), Westridge stuns him through the window with a golf

club (square 60). This scene plays along pretty well with the hypotheses of the spectator.

### **Let's Throw the Double-Sided Dice**

The snakes and ladders game of *Anaconda* that I'm presenting is, manifestly, only one reading of the film. It does not illustrate all possible receptions. To create a totally exhaustive game analogy, it would be necessary to make a grid with a square, and often with even more than one, for each shot of the film — such effort could easily produce a game board of 1000 to 2000 squares. A spectator, knowing that Jennifer Lopez and Eric Stolz cannot die, could very well trace a ladder between the square 4 where we see them for the first time and the square 98 at the end of the film where they're still united. In the light of the first intertitle explaining that anacondas «regurgitate their prey in order to kill and eat them again», one could also trace a ladder between this intertitle (square 1) and the moment when Serone is indeed regurgitated (square 88). Nevertheless, the present version of the *Anaconda* game board clarifies perfectly the narrative structure of the horror film, genre film and even more fundamentally of the classical Hollywood cinema. Like David Bordwell explains:

Hollywood narration asks us to form hypotheses that are highly probable and sharply exclusive. (...) ... the classical film sharply delimits the range of our expectations. (...) On the whole, classical narration creates probable and distinct hypotheses. Characters goal orientation are often reinforced and guides the direction these hypotheses will take [BORDWELL, STAIGER and THOMPSON, 1985: 38].

The spectator predicts the action of a film based both on meanings provided by the narrative and on their knowledge and horizons of expectations. One could imagine that a spectator would not notice or recognize, for example, the suspicious look of Mateo at the arrival of Serone (square 7). In this instance, the spectator would then “fall” on another square and would not take the ladder. As everyone knows, the snakes and ladders game is a game of dice (a game of chance, to make reference to one of Roger Caillois' four categories of games that I will introduce later). It is the

roll of a dice that determines the number of squares covered by pawns. It is not the game that changes, but each of the gaming sessions. In this sense, the film is associated with a game of possibilities<sup>12</sup>. But as Bordwell noted, the number of possibilities is reduced a great deal in a classic film and even more in a horror film. The number of inferences that the spectator can produce is limited. As the filmic game progresses, the chance of facing an impromptu situational reversal decreases. Seeing the suspicious look of Mateo, the spectator does not wonder: «Is the captain a happy person?». In the play of hypothesis, the dice of *Anaconda* has only two sides: «is Mateo Serone's accomplice or not?», «will this character be killed or not?», «is the anaconda going to attack or not?». The rules of the filmic game and stereotypes influence the spectator's hypotheses, thus encouraging a ludic attitude. Knowing very well that the film's itinerary is marked out by ladders and snakes, spectators try to guess which route they are embarking upon, and to which final destination it will lead, while retaining all the pleasures of falling into a possible unforeseeable trap.

### **Let's Play Again to Experience Vertigo**

Defending the gratuitous nature of play, Amossy distinguishes the games that educate from those that arouse emotions, violent ones in the case of terror. A monster film such as *Anaconda* is a snakes and ladders game, not a game of chess. Therefore, it is necessary to take the stereotypes for what they are: «direction signs of the ludic domain. They announce at the entry and at critical points of the fictional terror: "All those that enter here accept to surrender to the dizziness of fear"» [AMOSSY, 1991: 142, freely translated]. The concept of vertigo is herein fundamental. It is borrowed from Roger Caillois' anthropological study of play and games [(1958) 1979] and essential to the comprehension of the filmic game.

Caillois proposes a division of games into four main rubrics: competition (*agôn*), chance (*alea*), vertigo (*ilinx*) and simulation (*mimicry*). Still, for Caillois, this classification does not cover the entire universe of play. That's why he then places those four types of game on a continuum between two opposite poles that can be related, in the English language, to the distinction between "play" and "game".

At one extreme an almost indivisible principle, common to diversion, turbulence, free improvisation, and carefree gaiety is dominant. It manifests a kind of uncontrolled fantasy that can be designated by the term *paidia*. At the opposite extreme, this frolicsome and impulsive exuberance is almost entirely absorbed or disciplined by a complementary, and in some respects inverse, tendency to its anarchic and capricious nature: there is a growing tendency to bind it with arbitrary, imperative, and purposely tedious conventions, to oppose it still more by ceaselessly practicing the most embarrassing chicanery upon it in order to make it more uncertain of attaining its desired effect. This latter principle is completely impractical, even though it requires an ever greater amount of effort, patience, skill, or ingenuity. I call this second component *ludus* [(1958) 1961: 13].

As all films do, *Anaconda* comes under the *ludus*. It's a game, not completely free play. To participate, the spectator must obey the system of rules particular to the game of narrative cinema. Yet, the spectator that chooses to go to see such a film knows that he or she will not have to rack their brains to stay involved. The ready-made narrative form ensures that rudimentary preliminary knowledge will be more than adequate to understand and anticipate the narrative. The spectator may enter in competition (*agôn*) with the film and thus try not to get caught up in the game of terror. He knows however, that he will not have to sidestep complicated and constantly embarrassing chicanery. The film would tend much more toward the *paidia*, toward entertainment, turbulence or excessive spontaneous amusement. To better understand the sensations experienced by the monster film spectator, one must then take into consideration the fundamental pairing of simulation (*mimicry*) and vertigo (*ilinx*).

The appearance of a monster in the course of the snakes-displacements produces what we can call vertiginous sequences, sequences producing a «thrilling intensification of the “pleasure of total physical involvement”» [NAHOUM-GRAPPE, 1993: 169, freely translated].

The «pretending for real» of vertigo is better felt, and, consequently, better proven. Thus, in the order of sensations, when things are lived «falsely», thanks to simulacra or appropriate techniques, they are felt more purely, and therefore better constituted as objective, proven in their truth [NAHOUM-GRAPPE, 1993: 169, freely translated].

Some film critics weren't scared by the anaconda, blaming the special effects. Others have found it a «cool piece of shockdom» [PRIGGE, 1997] or as Blanchard, believed in this stereotype of terror.<sup>13</sup> One way or another, it is the giant snake, mechanically or digitally articulated, that remains the attraction of *Anaconda* and that gives it its effectiveness.

... [C]inematographic processes that allow one to make a reptilian monster rise out of a human body abruptly and horribly shredded (*The Thing, Alien...*) are extent artifices capable of advantageously represent scary alterity.

In a word, all techniques of presentation which are capable of provoking a surprise, a sudden chill that ably paralyzes critical abilities instantaneously operates, on the stereotype of fear, for its effectiveness; from which arises the relatively brief existence of terror narratives and their rapid aging. The topicality of techniques of fear is extremely limited: effects are valid only for their novelty and their immediacy. This is why the industry of terror, where cinema occupies a preponderant place, works essentially to invent and to perfect its effects. It is not a question of renewing the resource of stereotypes of fear but rather to nurse the modes of their *mise en scène* [AMOSSY, 1991: 135-136, freely translated].

When all is said and done, the spectator engages in a horror movie for the snakes-displacements. During the roller-coaster ride in the Amazonian forest, the spectator wants to be scared, shaken, seized, and transported. He or she craves the pleasures found in an instant of giddy fear, of pure action, of speed, in short to take pleasure from the vertigo of images

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and sounds. The snakes and ladders game analogy can obviously be applied to other movies that

do not have a snake as monster. Monster films stay the same, only the monster changes. Spectators get the same sensations from of a shark (*Jaws*, 1975), a crocodile (*Lake Placid*, 1999<sup>14</sup>), a rat (*Willard*, 2003), a malefic car (*Christine*, 1983), a zombie (*Resident Evil*, 2002), etc. No matter what stereotype of fear is used, one thing is known with certainty: if it is experienced *au premier degré*, it will not be five minutes before one has, like Blanchard, hands covering eyes and the two feet pulled up on her seat.

### **Winning the Filmic Game: ludicity against lucidity**

All reactions connected to snakes-displacement are effects of the stereotypes of fear. These are the spectator's joys, simple joys indeed, but why deny them to oneself because of an overactive critical faculty that demands lucidity. It is, finally, from playful interactions that horror and genre films take all their values. The ludicity has to take over lucidity. It is necessary to play the game.

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**THE ENDNOTES WERE MISTAKENLY NOT PRINTED IN THE JOURNAL** -----

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> - For instance, used as a promotional quotation in the booklet of the standard DVD edition of the film, Thelma Adams of the *New York Post* defines *Anaconda* as: «A creepy, crawly, guilty pleasure!»

<sup>2</sup> - I use the term "stereotype" in a broad sense, making also reference to the notions of clichés and commonplaces.

<sup>3</sup> - The lack of freedom inherent to the film critic's work might partly explain the "second degré" attitude

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discussed earlier. For Huizinga: «The spirit of the professional is no longer the true play-spirit, it is lacking in spontaneity and careless» [(1938) 1955: 197].

<sup>4</sup> - As Bordwell observes: «Generally, the spectator comes to the film already tuned, prepared to focus energies toward story construction and to apply sets of schemata derived from the context and prior knowledge» [1985: 34].

<sup>5</sup> - Noël Carroll also notes that this repetition does not detract from the experience [1990: 97-98].

<sup>6</sup> - The cognitive approach to film studies states this knowledge in many ways. For instance, as Branigan says: «It's my belief that a film spectator, through an exposure to a small number of films, knows how to understand a potentially infinite number of new films. The spectator is able to recognize immediately repetitions and variations among films, even though the films are entirely new, and outwardly quite distinct» [BRANIGAN, 1984: 17]. Before *Anaconda*, the spectator, to enumerate few references made in the reviews of Llosa's film, could have for instance seen : *Alligator* (1980), *Arachnophobia* (1990), *Curse II: The Bite* (1988), *Dead Calm* (1988), *Jaws* (1975 - Bill Bulter having photographed both films), *Piranha* (1978), *Swamp Thing* (1981), *The Relic* (1996), etc.

<sup>7</sup> - In addition to local newspapers and some film magazines, I have practically consulted all the film reviews of *Anaconda* listed by *the Movie Review Query Engine* (<[http://www.mrqe.com/lookup?^Anaconda+\(1997\)>](http://www.mrqe.com/lookup?^Anaconda+(1997)>)).

<sup>8</sup> - «The first category contains all objects of terror that concretize a transgression of normality and elementary laws of the known physical world. (...) A second category regroups harmless objects in themselves, that become scary only by an abnormal and strangely aggressive behaviour. (...) Finally, one finds a third category of beings and objects arousing a certain repulsion or a vague fear because of associations that are attached to them» [AMOSSY, 1991: 130-131, freely translated].

<sup>9</sup> - It's also interesting to note that the snakes and ladders game relies on one of the most important binary oppositions of the classic narrative. Indeed, in the game, the ladders symbolize the good and the snakes, the evil [CHAMBERLAND and PROVOST, 1996: 12]. And these notions of good and evil are conveyed in terms of actions and consequences.

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<sup>10</sup> - Ted Prigge in a newsgroup review of the *IMDb* writes: «Director Llosa (...) plays with our nerves a bit, including some not-so-subtle movie allusions to earlier creature-features, like “Jaws.” And he even plays with the old Ebert cliché BADF (Brother Always Dies First), when Ice Cube says he's going to go back into the water to check on a missing crew member (cue: groaning by everyone in the theatre)» [1997].

<sup>11</sup> - While making fun of the film by questioning in his review the ones that haven't seen it, James Bowan asks: «5. Which one of the following is not eaten by a snake? (a) Jonathan Hyde, (b) Jon Voigt, (c) Ice Cube. Be careful with this one. The answer is not the same as it would have been 10 or 20 years ago» [BOWAN, 1997].

<sup>12</sup> - One must distinguish between the two levels of narrative cinema: 1) the determination of the cinematographic work that, from screenplay to production, applies itself to eliminate the stroke of accident and that from then on elaborates a progress known before hand, without possibility of error or surprise; and 2) the capacity of the plotting and of the *mise en scène* to play in and with chance, risk and especially, possibility. At this second level, all narrative films do have a share of *alea*.

<sup>13</sup> - We have to ask ourselves «until what point the scary object can be mechanized without cancelling the reaction of fear» [AMOSSY, 1991: 132, freely translated].

<sup>14</sup> - The back cover of the standard DVD Edition of the film is quoting David Poland from *TNT Roughcut.com* : «This Year's *Anaconda* !».