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WASHINGTON POST



**SCREAMS &
NIGHTMARES**
THE FILMS OF WES CRAVEN

BRIAN J. ROBB

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For Brigid, who always asks the right questions.

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ONE

THE NIGHTMARE MAN

WES CRAVEN BEGAN his five-decade-long directing career in 1972 with *The Last House on the Left*, still seen as a shocking and controversial film over half a century later. Banned in Britain, it was one of the notorious ‘video nasties’ caught up in the tabloid fever which led to the 1984 Video Recordings Act. It wasn’t until 1977 that Craven released another completed mainstream film, *The Hills Have Eyes*, about a family of ferocious mountain mutants. These two movies alone quickly gained the reluctant horror director a cult following.

Much more was to come over the following 40 years, from the unleashing of dream demon bogeyman Freddy Krueger, who dominated commercial horror cinema for most of the 1980s, to more rewarding and mature works like *The Serpent and the Rainbow* and *The People Under the Stairs*. It was his triumphant post-modern return to his earlier haunt of Elm Street in *Wes Craven’s New Nightmare* in 1994 that relaunched Craven as a horror brand name and prepared the way for the phenomenal audience response to *Scream* and its shockingly successful series of follow-ups. The fourth entry in the *Scream* series provided Craven with his swansong before his death in 2015. The franchise was later reborn once more, with a fifth film – simply titled *Scream* – released in 2022.

It often came as a tremendous surprise to journalists when they encountered Wes Craven and found that the man who had committed a series of often disturbing, visceral images to the cinema screen was softly spoken,

sharply intelligent, and always prepared to justify his activities. 'There's basically two ways of looking at this,' said Craven of the public perception of his horror persona. 'One is that I'm a frightening person making films; another is that I'm a person who understands how people are afraid, and who's making films about that fear and how to overcome it. I think I fall into the latter category. People tend to project things: "That's frightening, that's from outside, that must be resident in the person who's presenting it." But I think all of these fears and all of these personae are within all people. It's just that I seem to be skilled in identifying them and bringing them out through [my] characters.'

That was a skill Craven discovered relatively late in life, only taking up filmmaking after his 30th birthday, following a successful academic career, including a spell as a professor. Dubbed by the press as 'the Don among the dead men', the 'Sultan of Slash', a 'gentleman terrorist', or even the 'Doctor of Fear', Craven laughed at those reactions to him and his work. The two careers he enjoyed seem as incompatible as his personality and the films he made. 'I'm sort of amused by that seeming dichotomy. I think that if you're a quiet, genteel person, there's probably a lot of rage in you that doesn't get expressed. You need an outlet for that. I deal with my dark side the way kids do at Halloween – I play with it. I'm terrified by the general tone of this world – it feels to me as if life is a series of life-or-death struggles of the species. This entire world is steeped in blood; it's part of the game. So, unless you wrap yourself in a coma, you recognise that you're part of it. One of the ways that I can get rid of a little of that tension is to make crazy, violent films where I have a measure of control over that level of madness.'

Although it took over a decade for Craven to achieve unparalleled critical and commercial success with *A Nightmare on Elm Street* in 1984, it was really a 25-year struggle for the director to reach the pinnacle of his career with *New Nightmare* and the *Scream* movies in the 1990s. He fought an uphill battle against the conditions under which he had to work; against inadequate budgets and short production schedules; against the intemperate censors who tried (and in several cases succeeded) to control what he could show to adult audiences; and against the Hollywood studios and ego-driven producers who gave Craven the chance to realise his cinematic vision, only to insist on their own commercially driven 'shock' endings or their right to re-edit his work.

With hindsight, it was worthwhile, even if much of his career development was seemingly haphazard. 'When I'm interviewed, I'm always aware that people are under the impression that I'm following a much more controlled path than I really am,' admitted Craven. 'It's much more of a random thing.'

Craven's body of work coherently and consistently explored a series of themes. The concerns which dominated his movies, including one generation's betrayal of the next and the breakdown of the American family, developed out of his own formative years. 'There are many reasons I return to this theme, including the fact that I come from a broken family myself. Mostly though, it's to do with my feeling that the next generation is getting short shrift. The break-up of the nuclear family and the breakdown of the environment all point to the next generation somehow being discounted.'

Following the success of *Scream* in 1996, Hollywood looked differently at Wes Craven. He had repeatedly shocked and entertained audiences with his often nightmare-inspired visions. The mainstream commercial success of the *Scream* series – which was even bigger than the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* films, and gave Craven significant creative control throughout – allowed the director to use the power of his horror brand to escape the genre which he felt stereotyped him as a 'guru of gore'. In the late-1990s, Craven not only wrote a novel (*Fountain Society*, 1999), but wielded his new power to sponsor young up-and-coming filmmakers under the 'Wes Craven Presents' banner. He was now a brand name in his own right. 'Even at their most ferocious, like my earlier films, I think my work has always had an openness about it, especially in my treatment of [my] characters,' said Craven, always keen to have his films regarded as more than just gruesome entertainment. 'Even the worst and most heinous person in my films had a side that is human and is vulnerable. I think even the people who have been depicted as the best can have a side that is evil. I have really very few apologies for my early films, except I wish they could be better in some ways.'

As he entered the final phase of his filmmaking career, that would see him make mainstream movies like inspirational drama *Music of the Heart* and Hitchcock-style thriller *Red Eye*, as well as mainstream horror films like werewolf movie *Cursed* and reincarnation drama *My Soul to Take*, Craven felt that perhaps he'd been too laid-back for his own good about his work. 'I could

have done better if I'd been stronger as a person and screamed at people more,' he suggested. 'If I want anything as a director, it's to be more ferocious with people who are trying to fuck with me. That's not a big part of my nature, but [movie] directors need that. It's necessary in some ways, in the trench warfare of making a film. There are legions of people who want to diminish the film in one way or another – make it safer, make it easier, make it cheaper – and you find yourself constantly fighting to keep other people's hands off your films.'

Battles with producers, studios, and film censors dominated Wes Craven's career, affecting the outcome of many of his films (even including late entries like *Cursed*) and causing him to attempt to give up making horror films altogether on more than one occasion. His fans have to be thankful that Craven persevered during the difficult years, as his work has become more and more satisfying for audiences as it has matured. He and his films have stood the test of time.

The story of Wesley Earl Craven began on 2 August 1939. He was born into a strict, deeply religious, working class Baptist family who lived in Cleveland, Ohio. He was the youngest of three children, preceded by his brother Paul, who was aged 10 when Craven was born, and sister Carole. His father, also Paul, worked in a factory, while his mother, Caroline Miller Craven, was a secretary. Craven's childhood years spanned World War Two and the great consumer boom of the 1950s, and he recalled them as being mainly happy times, but, as he discovered later, he didn't know any better and had no other models with which to compare his own youthful experiences. The biggest events of Craven's life during these early years were the departure of his father from the family before Craven was four years old, the subsequent divorce of his parents, and then the unexpected death of his father from a heart attack. The emotional impact of this trio of family crises would surface repeatedly in his work.

Craven preferred to talk about his work rather than about his private life, whether it was his childhood, his parents, or his own family of two children and two ex-wives. He did, however, recognise that his background had a profound and direct effect on his creative and imaginative life. 'I don't feel very

comfortable with [my family history],’ he admitted. ‘I was raised under a very spiritual environment. A great amount of time, energy, and study was spent on things other than the physical or material reality of this world. That stuck with me. Much of that fundamentalist world is concerned with good and evil. As I worked my way out of that, spiritually and intellectually, into whatever world I’m in now, I nonetheless was set on that path of examining things in the largest scenario possible quite early. I think that was good.’

The young Craven found a haven away from the family home where he also found a new ‘father figure’. ‘I was raised by this other family during the day, while my mother was working,’ he said. ‘That guy, his name was Eddie Biltin, had an 8mm [movie] camera. He was always taking 8mm films. He would also rent them from the camera shops. In those days, you could rent 8mm [versions] of feature films. I was really fascinated by it, but I never thought of making them. [Biltin] would take us to Telenews [made by the International News Service] at the end of World War Two. We’d watch all these newsreels, so I had seen films, but I’d seen “real” stuff. That kind of stuck in my mind.’ This early exposure to documentary filmmaking would ultimately feed into Craven’s approach to his first ever ‘scary movie’, *The Last House on the Left*, shot with a straight-ahead documentary realism.

Often the most effective sequences in Wes Craven’s films are drawn from his remembrances of childhood fears. It was a well of inspiration he returned to again and again, to spine-tingling effect. ‘I think what’s really frightening are fears that were realised in the first five years of life. Like fear of darkness, of abandonment, the school bully, or fear of your own body. And so I try to base my films on those early, early fears.’

As a child, Craven was afraid of bullies at school, and one in particular was to unwittingly inspire an enduring horror movie icon. ‘Freddy was named after a boy that got his newspapers on the same corner I did, and he used to try to beat me up,’ Craven admitted. Reading and literature was a large part of Craven’s teenage years. He worked at the local public library where he discovered the works of Dostoyevsky, Poe, and Dickens. Craven told *Film Comment* magazine: ‘[I] started reading everything I could get my hands on. I became especially fascinated by Virgil’s *The Golden Bough*, *Crime and Punishment*, and especially with Joseph Campbell’s ideas about recurring

patterns about heroes descending to Hell to face themselves on a primal level, and that the hero and the villain are two sides of a single personality.'

Some of Craven's strongest childhood memories are of the nightmares he regularly suffered. Later in life he was to take great pleasure in using his dreams constructively in his filmmaking, allowing him to leave the recurring nightmares behind. 'I don't get nightmares. I used to when I was a kid, and I think part of making the movies that I make is to process those nightmares into films and thereby get control of them. It's like putting the genie back in the bottle.' The Bible teachings Craven was subjected to on the role of sin in life stayed with him right through childhood, and there's nothing like the fear of God or the Devil to spark off nightmares in an imaginative child.

While Craven was later grateful for the outlook on the world his upbringing gave him, after he left home he was painfully aware that there was also a huge downside. '[One] of the bad things that came out of that, obviously, was the fact that it forbade a lot of things, things that everybody is deserving of, from movies to sex,' he noted. 'It tended to be a very secretive world. They did not discuss a lot of things. That really influenced me and now I have this overwhelming urge to know the truth about everything. I subscribe to far more magazines and newspapers than I can ever read and I have books coming out of every orifice in my house.'

Before he escaped the family home, Wes Craven was being prepared to follow a most unusual vocation. 'I was being trained to sell rare coins at a department store in Baltimore,' he said, of the offbeat profession that nearly claimed him. 'I was getting into rare coins not because it was what I wanted to do, but I thought I could write at night.' His determination to find out about the wider world and learn from sources other than his parents or the Bible would lead Craven to become the first member of his family to attend college, where he reacted against his upbringing with a vengeance. He studied literature and psychology at the private Christian liberal arts Wheaton College in Illinois, graduating in 1963, and then took a single year master's degree in philosophy at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. 'When I finally got out of it [his home life], there was a sense of having been cheated out of a great deal and of having been misled a great deal,' Craven remembered. 'I wouldn't be surprised if part of the energy and ferocity of my films came out of that

subconscious sense of having been shafted.’ Craven’s college career almost ended before it had begun. ‘I lost a year of school because of paralysis,’ he revealed. ‘I got paralysed from the neck down when I was a freshman in college and had to drop out; it was a long recovery on that. I was laid up for half a year and then worked half a year to get out. Then I went back to college.’

While at college, Craven was exposed to more works of literature that would resonate through much of his later film work. ‘I once had a professor who told me that the most powerful thing about Milton’s *Paradise Lost* is that Lucifer is so attractive,’ recalled Craven, creator of such magnetic villains as Krug Stillo, Freddy Krueger, Horace Pinker, and Ghostface. ‘That is always the key to powerful stories; the villain is always attractive and charismatic. So when I started working in popular genre films, I kept that in mind. First comes the villain.’

The nature of evil was a constant topic when Craven was living at home, and he found that it recurred again and again in the literature he was studying, giving him a very grounded view of the issue. ‘It’s part of our nature, part of our life and every religion comes to grips with that. In some form or another it’s always there to deal with. Maybe it’s at the very core of human beings having free will. If there was no possibility of evil, you wouldn’t have any choice to make. The key to my films is not who or what you are, but what choice you make – that’s how you define yourself.’

In his 20s, education was the driving force for Wes Craven, and he seemed set for a successful career in teaching, although during his college and university years he had been involved in various aspects of the arts. ‘I had a long history of wanting to be a writer. I wrote prose and poetry throughout college. I had other artistic inclinations as well – I drew cartoons all through college and also had a lot of musical ability. I played guitar a lot of the time. There was a lot of talent floating around, but nothing really to do with photography or cinema whatsoever.’

His ultimate vocation as a filmmaker was not on Craven’s creative radar initially. ‘I didn’t see a great many films when I was young because I was restricted from seeing them by my family. The films I saw [in college] were [from] the European filmmakers. I saw, almost exclusively, the films of Bunuel, Fellini, Bergman, and Cocteau. I was immediately drawn to those fantastic

visions of dream-like things. If I had followed my natural course, I would be doing films much more on those lines. I learned about the horror genre as I became aware that was the only avenue I had. I became very interested in “fantastique” films. I’m standing on the shoulders, as we all do, of giants. I have the whole European film masters of the last generation behind me. I’m in complete awe of them.’

Other temptations at college were even harder to resist than the cinema, especially given Craven’s sheltered upbringing and sudden exposure to a much freer environment. Sex and drugs were undoubtedly a large part of campus life in the 1960s, and recreational drugs were to give Craven an interesting take on the world, both at college and in his early filmmaking days in New York City. ‘I feel that’s the way I perceive consciousness, really,’ he said. ‘That it is, in many ways, a very carefully controlled dream of waking consciousness. That once you start to get into something like dreams, the mind becomes quite blurred. Certainly, during the time of my life when I was doing psychedelic drugs and so forth, I could see that suddenly reality all shimmers and it’s transparent. You say, “My God, it’s all just an illusion.” You’re putting your head over into an entirely different dimension. I’m fascinated by that, by what is out there, what is native to that and can operate in that and just pull itself into our little band of the world. I’ve never had bad trips – they’ve always been very interesting to me.’

Education gave Craven an intellectual background which he later used to effective ends in his films, drawing on themes and characters from the past greats of literature or cinema to inform his own work in the horror genre, which was often undervalued by critics and audiences alike. ‘I think I had one great advantage in that I come from an academic background,’ he asserted. ‘I was absolutely drenched in the best of literature and the best of cinema, whereas a lot of other filmmakers come out of a very populist background, where they read comic books and at night they saw one-reelers. Because I used to teach and I went through a master’s degree in philosophy, I’ve read the best and I’ve seen the best, so I can’t help but be influenced by it. I just take that and say how would that be in a popular film. Maybe I have a little bit of an advantage.’

By the mid-1960s, Craven was fulfilling parental expectations. He taught English and humanities up to college level, and by 1964 had met and married Bonnie Susan Broecker. The couple had two children in quick succession, Jonathan (later a filmmaker himself) and Jessica, while Craven continued his teaching career at an engineering school called Clarkson College of Technology (later Clarkson University) in Potsdam (the location of the original Elm Street), in New York state. Already, however, Craven felt a growing need to escape the limiting confines of his teaching career, and his general disillusionment with the academic world was to find an outlet in his first tentative filmmaking experience.

Made by Clarkson College of Technology students in the first half of 1968, *Pandora Experimentia* was a 16mm, 45-minute film loosely inspired by the TV adventure series *Mission: Impossible*. With very limited resources available on the campus, the young filmmakers had to make do with whatever they could lay their hands on. Craven acted as cinematographer (as he owned the film camera, a 16mm Revere), as well as providing the filmmaking equipment for student co-directors Ken Lyon and John Heneage, both seniors then in their early 20s. Around 60 Potsdam and SUNY students took part in the project. The movie, which cost about \$400 to make, mostly for film and developing, was shot on reversal stock, so the original film had to be run through a projector at each showing. Sound was recorded separately on a reel-to-reel tape machine and synched up with the projector using a varistat audio transformer during screenings, which took place in May 1968 at Clarkson (tickets were \$1 each). *Pandora Experimentia* was well received on campus, despite its rawness. As Craven told *Clarkson Alumni Magazine* in 1989: ‘It was more like, “Let’s make as many mistakes as possible and see what happens.” None of us knew anything about sound, none of us knew anything about editing, and none of us knew anything about cinema.’

Ken Lyon, co-director on *Pandora Experimentia*, remembered the formative experience of working with Wes Craven on his first filmmaking effort. ‘Wes was my sophomore humanities teacher,’ he told me. ‘He was an OK teacher, and I was an OK student. A couple of years later, John Heneage and I wrote the script and directed the film. I came up with the title, *Pandora Experimentia*, and Wes was the cameraman. First night receipts were about \$350, standing

room only. Total receipts for both [May 1968] screenings were around \$800, which almost entirely went toward beer and other refreshments for the cast party.'

There was only one copy of *Pandora Experimentia* in existence, which is now apparently lost. 'Neither John nor I could afford the \$200 required to make a copy of the film,' said Lyon. 'A few years later, John reluctantly sent the film to Wes so that Wes could use it as an example of his work as he was trying to break into the industry. John thought that he would never see the original again. I have been trying to locate it, with no success.' Looking back at the project, Lyon is sure that it was this experience that first caused Craven to seriously consider a career in film. 'This was pretty much Wes' first "full length" film. I joined the Clarkson Drama Club and had the lead in a play that folded in production because of lack of participation and interest. That's where I met Heneage, whose expertise was in set design and theatrical production. He thought that we should make a movie instead. The club faculty advisor, Stu Fischhoff, was friends with Wes, who had just bought a used camera. I believe that [the film] was an inspiration for Wes. It was also a lot of fun for all of us.'

In *Pandora Experimentia*, a group of men in suits are searching for a Pandora's Box-type McGuffin, a search which takes them to a pool hall, a bank (they arrive during a robbery), and the local jail (shot in Potsdam police station). The student filmmakers staged a traffic accident on Market Street (where Craven lived for a time), and created an action sequence by throwing a showroom dummy from a local radio tower. Lyon and several others were arrested for trespassing after climbing the tower to achieve the scene, but quickly released. A crazy doctor (also played by Lyon) is seen conducting 'body transplants' (filmed in Potsdam hospital). 'Wes was very creative in his use of the camera,' recalled Lyon, who remembered that while filming in a supermarket, 'Wes was pushed around in a shopping cart as he was filming.'

Craven was instrumental in Lyon's subsequent career. A personal letter of recommendation from Craven helped Lyon get accepted on to the Johns Hopkins University writing seminars in Baltimore, Maryland, where Wes had previously attended, for a master's degree in creative writing. 'Wes and I continued our friendship into the early 1970s,' said Lyon. 'I would often see him when I drove back to NYC to visit my parents. Wes and I had some great

times together, and I was present at two porn shoots where he was the sound man. Years later, I heard about *A Nightmare on Elm Street* and recognised Wes was the director. However, I was not able to contact him at that time. He was a good friend of mine for a while, and I was saddened to hear of his death.'

Student legend has it that the Clarkson campus Theta Chi fraternity house was also used in filming. The building, located on Elm Street in Potsdam, was formerly a funeral parlour, a gothic touch that must have amused Craven. The bank robbery that featured in the short film was staged further along that same Elm Street, and some students even later claimed that the boiler room at Old Snell Hall on the campus inspired Freddy Krueger's lair in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, making this humble unsung student film one possible source of many of those later Wes Craven screen *Nightmares*.

The success of this amateur filmmaking endeavour was to lead to Craven looking for a more permanent way out of the academic life he had drifted into. 'I think at that point in my life I was still trying to please my parents, unconsciously trying to be the good boy that went off to school and then became a teacher,' he admitted. 'This was an acceptable profession and very respectable. About four or five years into teaching . . . I was always in trouble because I was writing parodies of the power structures and mimeographing them out and writing all sorts of comedy. I was even making little home movies. I just realised I was profoundly bored and out of place. I didn't want to be going for my PhD, and that was the whole pressure: "Now, you must get your PhD." All my friends would say, "You have to get tenure." I was looking at their lives and, y'know, they were bored, everyone was drinking heavily and they were having affairs with each other's wives and husbands. It just wasn't me, and so I just made one of those big leaps. I said, "I'm gonna take a shot at doing something that I would really enjoy." So I just quit and went to New York.'

In reality, it wasn't quite as dramatic as that. Craven spent his summer 1968 vacation exploring the filmmaking opportunities in New York City. It was a useful summer for making contacts, although his time visiting documentary director D. A. Pennebaker, who was working on his 1968

concert film *Monterey Pop*, which boasted Martin Scorsese as one of many editors, didn't lead directly to any filmmaking work. Craven hung around the production offices of Leacock-Pennebaker, met Norman Mailer, and saw real-life filmmakers at work. Having finally quit his job at Clarkson College, he was loath to return with his tail between his legs as the summer drew to a close. The autumn of 1968 saw him return reluctantly to teaching, working for a year in Madrid-Waddington High School in Potsdam in order to make ends meet.

Craven took the next step towards the world of movies by making use of personal connections. Steve Chapin – the youngest of the four Chapin brothers – had been Craven's student at Clarkson College and got to know his professor very well through their common interest in music and their work on the campus radio station, where Craven presented a late-night show and Chapin played live with his band. They occasionally saw each other after their Clarkson days as Craven, Bonnie, and their two young children were living in the same Brooklyn Heights building as Chapin's mother. Aware of Craven's dormant filmmaking ambitions, Chapin (whose uncle was Ricky Leacock of Leacock-Pennebaker) recommended his ex-professor contact his brother Harry Chapin, who was working as a film editor in New York City, to see what opportunities there might be. It wasn't until the following summer of 1969, a year after his first attempts to start a filmmaking career, that Craven finally acted on this suggestion, after his additional year of teaching came to a close and it looked unlikely that he'd be able to return.

Although he later became better known for his musical career, including the hits 'Taxi' and 'Cat's in the Cradle', Harry Chapin was then working as an editor on industrial films, television commercials, and documentaries, while at the same time making award-winning films of his own, including *The Legendary Champions*, a collaboration with Jim Jacobs which was nominated for the 1969 Oscar for Best Feature Documentary. 'Harry was a fantastic film editor and producer of industrials,' Craven said. 'He taught me the Chapin Method [of editing]. Nuts and bolts – get rid of the crap!' This was someone from whom Craven could learn, even if Chapin couldn't actually offer him a job. 'It was a very intense year and a half of doing everything, from sweeping floors upwards,' recalled Craven of his genuine start in the film business. 'I started as a messenger, which was a pretty big jump from being a professor, and

I drove a cab in New York for about six months. I got robbed twice in Harlem.'

Craven was inspired by the creativity among the group of underground and industrial filmmakers he'd fallen in with in New York. He admitted he learned much more during this short period than he ever could have by taking a more conventional route into filmmaking, such as through film school or in a Hollywood context. 'It all helped immensely. It was a unique opportunity, because it was within a very wide open structure of people that were making documentaries, little feature films, industrials, everything. So I got exposed to a great amount of technique, and it wasn't within that rigid Hollywood structure where, for instance, if you're an apprentice editor in Hollywood, you must stay that way for eight years before you're even allowed to touch film. Within a year and a half I was doing everything. Even though I spent years learning some of the techniques that an apprentice might have learned in his more controlled way, I still had a chance to be making movies at the same time. It was a great way [of working]. I think if I had started in California, I would have had a much slower growth.'

Approaching his 30th birthday, Craven had to make up for much lost time. The would-be filmmaker learned to edit film, a skill which was to stand him in good stead, and during this period he met director/producer Peter Locke, who was later instrumental in launching Craven's *The Hills Have Eyes* films. Locke was working as a director on a series of low budget films, and gave Craven, along with three others, the chance to edit his early effort *You've Got to Walk It Like You Talk It or You'll Lose That Beat*, which featured Robert Downey Sr. (who worked with Craven again on the 1985 revival of *The Twilight Zone* television series), Richard Pryor, Allen Garfield, Zalman King, and Liz Torres. The film was a satire about a young hippie who, searching for meaning in his life, wanders through Central Park meeting all sorts of absurd characters.

Although he was working, this wasn't quite the life that Craven or his young family had been hoping for. 'I can tell you, when I was getting robbed in Harlem when I was driving a cab, I thought: "This really is the end of a stupid man," because I'd quit teaching. I'd had all this comfort, summers off with pay, with a wife and two kids, two cars, two motorcycles, two dogs. It was

a complete disaster. At the point I was driving the cab, I just thought, “I’ve blown it,” like it was some sort of foolish fantasy.’

Craven had been willing to take any job in film simply to gain experience and learn how it all worked, but his endeavours weren’t paying the bills or bringing in enough money to provide for his wife and two young children. Making connections within the New York underground and industrial filmmaking community, he started getting odd jobs here and there on various productions. ‘I took sound on documentaries,’ remembered Craven of one of his first jobs in filmmaking. ‘I worked all around the clock, just going from one job to another, from day jobs managing post-production to synching up dailies [matching up the sound recorded to footage crudely assembled after shooting prior to a final edit] at night for various documentaries. It was very intense. My marriage collapsed. I lived on virtually nothing. I lost about 30lbs, falling to 135lbs once.’

About to be divorced from Bonnie due to the strain of their unpredictable existence, but with two children who still depended on his income, in 1969 Wes Craven came very close to calling it a day in the film business altogether. The insecurity the family now faced was very trying for them. ‘I think I was switching everything,’ he said of this key moment. ‘It was a real watershed in my life. I was dropping out, doing drugs, getting into filmmaking. Bonnie, to her credit, was perhaps more conventional than I wanted to be at that time. She was worried about the insecurity of the area of the arts in which I wanted to work, quite rightly, as the early 1970s was not a successful time for me.’

A chance meeting with aspiring film producer Sean S. Cunningham changed the course of Wes Craven’s career. ‘Within a few weeks I had this job synching up dailies on this little feature [*Together*], quit driving the cab, and decided I was gonna try again. That job led directly in 10 months to being offered a film to write, direct and cut.’ That film was *The Last House on the Left*.

TWO

THE CULT DIRECTOR

IT HAD COST him his marriage to Bonnie Broecker, but 31-year-old Wes Craven was fulfilling his dream of working in the film industry as the 1970s dawned. Over the next decade he would only complete two mainstream films – *The Last House on the Left* and *The Hills Have Eyes* – but both marked out his future direction as an original, startling, and unique genre filmmaker.

As a result of his various assignments in the New York underground filmmaking community, Craven had met many people involved in producing a wide variety of movies, and one of them was to prove key to his first directorial work. Sean S. Cunningham was a vibrant, ambitious film producer two years younger than Craven. After working in theatre on Broadway, Cunningham switched to movies, and his first feature was a 1970 underground film called *The Art of Marriage*.

Cunningham started working on his second movie in the spring of 1970, using the \$100,000 profit he'd made from *The Art of Marriage* as his budget. He had made some progress when he asked Wes Craven to synch up the dailies, but Cunningham's cash ran out and he sub-let his facilities to other filmmakers until he could resume production on his second movie, now called *Together*, in September 1970. By that time, Craven was doing so much work on the feature, including synching, editing, and co-ordinating the shooting, that he was billed as 'associate producer'.

Working under cinematographer, sometime co-director, and editor Roger Murphy, Craven was helping out with the editing much of the time, and, as Cunningham and Murphy had frequent disagreements, Craven was in the ideal position to carry on Murphy's work. Such was the flexibility of low-budget productions like *Together* that Craven even managed to cut his directorial teeth on the movie. During the cold winter months, Craven and Cunningham escaped for two days to Puerto Rico, where Craven enjoyed the chance to direct some 'sunny, romantic stuff' to cut into the material Cunningham had already filmed.

Two more weeks of hard work on the final editing and sound mixing, and the film was ready to sell to a distributor. *Together* (also known as *Sensual Paradise*) featured actress Marilyn Briggs, who became better known as Marilyn Chambers, the Ivory Snow Girl in the famous ads, star of the later Mitchell Brothers' celebrated porn film *Behind the Green Door*, and David Cronenberg's early chiller *Rabid*. Her *Together* co-stars included Maureen Cousins, Sally Cross, Jade Hagen, Kim Hoelter, and Vic Monica.

The film, a mock documentary about sex in America, was financed by the Hallmark Releasing Corporation, a film distributor run by a trio of partners – Steve Minasian, Phil Scuderi, and Robert Barsamian – whose parent company owned a chain of cinemas, including drive-ins, in Massachusetts and were always hungry for new material. While not a large outfit by any means, one skill that the Hallmark Releasing Corporation possessed in abundance was marketing and they produced an ingenious, teasing ad campaign for Cunningham's *Together*.

The film, once believed lost but now unofficially available on DVD, made such a profit – around \$90,000 – for Hallmark that they quickly came back to Cunningham and Craven and asked for another. This time Hallmark wanted to play up the violence. They needed some 'drive-in fodder', a 'no-holds barred horror movie' following the success of *Mark of the Devil*, a West German-produced torture horror film they had successfully distributed to their drive-in circuit. Craven and Cunningham were only too ready to give them what they wanted: a no-holds barred horror movie. This was what both men had dreamed of, the chance to make their own movie with a guaranteed release.

They were to be their own bosses and had the finance in place. The only question was, what kind of horror film could they make?

According to Craven, Cunningham 'had been offered \$90,000 as a whole budget for a scary movie, for a group of theatre owners in Boston. It was the result of having finished that first film [*Together*], that film made money and he was offered by the distributor the chance to make another, if he would make a horror film. That's what they wanted for their programme. He asked me if I wanted to write it, direct it, and cut it. I said, "sure", even though I had never thought of writing a scary movie before. And so I just decided that I would write it, and I did, and we shot it in 16mm. [That was] *The Last House on the Left* and it was picked up. So suddenly I was a horror director, though I'd never thought of doing that.'

Of his first film script – which was actually 60 pages of close typed material not laid out in accepted Hollywood screenplay format – Craven admitted: 'It was written in a weekend. I said, "Okay, what's a horror film?" I really didn't know what they were. I thought they had a lot of craziness and they scared people, so I went off and spent a weekend with friends in Long Island. I wrote something that I thought would scare people.'

The material Craven drafted over that Labor Day holiday weekend was later heavily revised and bore little relation to what eventually appeared on the screen. If censors in America and Britain thought that what they saw in *The Last House on the Left* was extreme, they are lucky that Craven's original draft screenplay, even more gruesome and sadistic and then entitled *Sex Crime of the Century*, never came anywhere near to being shot. Sean Cunningham acted as a script editor as well as producer on this ad-hoc project, cutting out impossible-to-film scenes and reworking others to make them more acceptable and achievable on their tight budget. Once they set out to film their script, Craven and Cunningham realised that they wanted to make a 'real' movie with a proper story. Craven dumped much of the outrageous sexual content of his original scenario (a hangover from *Together*) and reconceptualised the violence, inspired by an unlikely source.

Craven's unlikely inspiration was a Swedish film he'd seen the previous year, Ingmar Bergman's *The Virgin Spring*. 'When I saw *The Virgin Spring*, I thought, what an incredible story. It was very conscious and above board. I just

thought it would be great to update [it] into something completely bizarre.’ Bergman’s Oscar-winning film tells the story of the virginal daughter of a prosperous family who is abducted by a trio of shepherds when she gets lost after her family set off on a religious pilgrimage. The girl is raped and murdered by two of the shepherds while a third, the youngest of the trio, watches in disgust. Later, the shepherds seek refuge at the home of the girl’s parents and are found out when they try and sell a distinctive item of the daughter’s clothing back to the family. When the father’s fears are confirmed by a witness, he takes bloody revenge on his three guests, pleading for divine forgiveness after the fact. The ‘virgin spring’ of the title is a spring of natural water that appears on the spot where his daughter lost her life.

Using this template, Craven updated the tale of *The Virgin Spring* to modern Connecticut in a revision of his rough *Sex Crimes of the Century* script, which he now called *Night of Vengeance*, the film’s shooting title. He replaced the virgin daughter with two hip teenagers, the innocent Mari (Sandra Cassell) and the street-smart Phyllis (Lucy Grantham). The three shepherds became a quartet of escaped criminal psychopaths, led by Krug Stillo (would-be musician David Hess), who manipulates and torments his drug-addicted teenage son Junior (Marc Sheffler, later a children’s television producer), the unwilling participant in the mayhem that was to come. Krug’s bisexual, proto-feminist girlfriend Sadie (Jeramie Rain) and Fred ‘Weasel’ Padowski (porn star Fred Lincoln) made up the rest of the gruesome alternative ‘family’.

The Last House on the Left sees the teenagers abducted, tortured, humiliated, and then killed in long, drawn-out detail, well beyond what had been seen in cinema at the time, but no longer as shocking as some censorship bodies still seem to believe. After the murders, with the killers visibly repulsed and shocked by what they have done, the four arrive at Mari’s home and are welcomed in as stranded travellers by her trusting parents, who are full of concern for their missing daughter. Putting various clues together – Mari’s peace symbol necklace on one of the gang, bloodied clothes stuffed in a suitcase, and an overheard conversation – John Collingwood (Gaylord St James), a doctor, and his wife Estelle (Cynthia Carr) find the body of their daughter. In their grief the pair plan a meticulous and deadly vengeance, the



Star quality – Eddie Murphy convinced Craven to direct *A Vampire in Brooklyn*.



Lance Henricksen heads the cast of 'monster-on-the-loose' thriller *Mind Ripper*.



The poster for 1996's *Scream*.



Ghostface. Edvard Munch couldn't have anticipated the feature film potential of his original painting, 'The Scream'.