

Horror Film: A Critical Introduction

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I have no qualms in stating straightaway that *Horror Film: A Critical Introduction* achieves everything it sets out to, and more. The book is part of the ‘Film Genres’ series, edited by Mark Jancovich and Charles Acland, and ‘provides an overview of the wide-ranging, protean and diverse genre of the horror film’ (1). It is clear, knowledgeable, and most importantly very readable. As a reasonably priced paperback, ‘designed first and foremost for a non-specialist reader’ (1), it provides a well-structured introduction not only to the genre but also the critical field and key debates within.

One of the core strengths of *Horror Film* is its clear structure. The nine chapters are divided into 3 sections: the first three overview the history of the genre, the second three overview major critical approaches and the last three look at the aesthetics and technologies of horror films.

Chapter 1, ‘1895-1938 Horror’s Process of Genrification’, begins with the contested origins of horror films, taking in early cinema, late-eighteenth-century phantasmagoria and magic lanterns. Leeder’s meticulous research is visible from the start, with careful citation

signposting the reader toward further scholarship. It does not stop at presenting information, however, and raises key questions about the genre, such as re-framing the debate away from what was the first horror film toward just how did the recognizable and durable, and even versatile, genre called ‘the horror film’ emerge? (9). Chapter 2, ‘1939-1973: Horror and the Crisis of Rationality’, continues with the shift of the genre’s reception in the wake of World War Two. Leeder singles out Val Lewton’s cycle of nine horror films as escaping the ‘narrative of decline’ (35), discussing younger and ‘gimmick’ focused films before *Psycho* (1960) raised the genre’s critical receptions. The third chapter covers 1974 to the present under the heading ‘High and Low’, encompassing banner years in horror cinema through to recent trends, such as J-horror and ‘torture porn’.

‘What is Horror?’ is asked by chapter four, addressing the difficulty of pinning down genre based on the presence of plot elements. It is a well-framed discussion, with Leeder’s working definition recognising that ‘genres are categories that supply both producers and audiences with a set of expectations that a given film can either fulfil or (more rarely) depart from’ (92). Another strength of *Horror Film* is seen here; Leeder’s utilisation of both oft-taught and lesser-known examples to give a more holistic view of the field – and engage with some overlooked texts. Here, Leeder uses the 1987 film *Angel Heart* as a case-study on genre. Apart from discussions of the core/periphery model, boundaries and genre hybridity (including a lengthy list of horror and erotica crossovers), there is a strong sub-section devoted to horror and comedy. Chapter 5 follows on the how with ‘The ‘Why?’ of Horror’ using a 2016 *Glamour* article and an episode of *Star Trek* as jumping-off points, going on to cover horror tinged with psychoanalysis, abjection, sadism and masochism, and body horror. The sixth chapter, ‘Horror’s Audiences, Critics and Censors’ covers a wealth of newer topics, addressing the ‘growing field of Audience Studies’ (137), the way horror’s audiences themselves have been disparaged, the paranoia surrounding youth audiences, and the

misconception horror is mostly for male audiences. It moves on to engage with Fandom studies as a recognition of the importance of audiences, using the debates fostered by fan communities of *The Cabin in the Woods* (2012) and *Twilight* (2008) as two examples that provoked strong reactions.

The final three chapters delve into more detail on the specific details and technology that underpin the horror genre. Chapter 7 is titled ‘Shocking and Spooky Sounds’ and begins an exploration of cinema as a ‘technological wonder’ that produced a ‘sense of unease and outright shock’ (160), initially with sound. Leeder mentions some teaching pedagogy – giving an example of a class exercise on comparing sound mixing. With subheadings on sound fidelity, the use of silence, and assaultive sound, Leeder gives the reader a lot to consider, and I would single out the section on ‘ventriloquism films’ as an especially strong sub-section (complete with a short analysis of *The Beaver* (2011)). Chapter 8 focuses on the use of colour, described here as a neglected field. Leeder laments the genre’s return to a preoccupation with a gritty palette under the subheading ‘back to black’. The final chapter, Digital Horrors, expands to incorporate viral videos of the social media age and phenomenon like the cult favourite tv show *Ghostwatch* (1992) and the ensuing ghost hunting tv shows. Leeder engages with Linnie Blake’s and Xavier Aldana Reyes’ conception of ‘Digital Horror’ as having its own devices and stylistic choices. This in turn encompasses a discussion on the central presence of long takes, such as in *Paranormal Activity* (2007) and ‘glitches’ that ‘mark the fallibility of digital media’ (224), using 2004’s *Unfriended* as the central example. It also encompasses broader trends in the genre, such as the move towards blockbuster film making and the growth of found footage films spurred on by *The Blair Witch Project* (1999).

All of which is to say that Leeder covers pretty much everything you’d hope to find within. Leeder’s examples are often so atypical it is hard not to wish he had expounded on

them a little more – I get the sense he could write full articles on many of them. Approaching it as an overview, more direct chapter titles might also have been an asset for undergraduate use; ‘What is Horror?’ is an effective and clear title, but I have to wonder if a more utilitarian ‘Defining the Horror Genre’ would have helped recommend the discussion to students rattling out essays.

This is an easy recommendation as an introduction to the horror film – though it often provides more than that. As an affordable paperback it would make a great course text for students who want a work to consult and would give them an excellent grounding in not only the material but in how to approach it. It would be a perfect addition to reading lists for courses on film, horror, genre, or any Gothic module that encompasses other media. To restate my earlier comments, it is wonderfully detailed, clear and accessible, and crucially goes beyond the basic examples.