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Past Issues

□ Hills, Matt:

The Pleasures of Horror

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A Review by Michele Paule

In *The Pleasures of Horror* Matt Hills shines a scholarly torch into the dimmer and less-explored vaults of theory surrounding horror genres and their audiences; in doing so, he reveals the ways in which previous accounts have failed to elucidate fully the pleasures that audiences and fans take in horror genres, or indeed to recognise the very manifestation of aspects of horror itself outside film and fiction.

With the broad ranging and painstaking scholarship we have come to expect of Hills, he argues that the pleasures of horror are performative, and that the performance of such pleasures is made manifest through the discursive practices of fans, and furthermore is framed within not only the texts themselves but also within those very theories which seek to account for the genre's appeal.

Hills opens by establishing the validity of notions of performativity in accounting for horror's pleasures as 'claims to agency' rather than as 'truth telling claims as to ... experienced realities' (p.xi). This agency would not only involve fans 'display of expertise and authority in relation to horrors' texts,' but also academics' citing of theoretical discourse in order to legitimate horror as an object of study (p.xi). His over-arching argument is that horror and its pleasures can be made sense of, and such sense reported, via a Foucauldian notion of discursive practices with their own fields, limits and perspectives.

The book is organised into four overarching sections. The first, 'Theorizing the Pleasures of Horror', interrogates existing scholarship concerning the pleasures of horror. This includes cognitive-philosophical approaches as exemplified in the work of Noel Carroll and Tzvetan Todorov, and the application of Freud's theories of the uncanny to understanding horror by scholars such as Robin Wood and Steven Schneider. Having disposed of the notion of the reality of reported fan experience in his introduction, Hills pays due attention to the essentialist nature of such a priori theorisation, and its assumptions of mass, undistinguished audiences. However, he goes beyond such well-rehearsed arguments to demonstrate how both psychoanalytical and cognitive analyses fail to account for horror's pleasures in part because they fail to describe the horrific. He argues that cognitive approaches, in their concentration on the emotion produced by horror, by their nature exclude films in which such horror is not based on fear, disgust or the narrative processes of disclosure. Similarly, he shows how theories drawing on

Freud's propositions of The Uncanny which focus on concepts of 'the return of the repressed' involve 'a vast semiotic fixing of horror's meanings', while those based on 'the reconfirmation of unsurmounted beliefs' fail to take into account fully the role of aesthetics in representations of the horrific (p.52).

Part II explores the pleasures of horror as framed within discursive practices of fans. In adopting this approach, Hills does not pay attention to the fans' claims as of pleasure as empirical evidence, but rather looks at the framing of such claims as performatively constructed pleasures.

He finds underpinning structural features in on-line fan discourses; these include the reinforcing of masculinities through the characterisation of the 'scare' aspects of horror as infantilised or feminised; the display of generic knowledge and connoisseurship, and claims to longevity of fandom. He also considers the fan/censor binary as essential to the genre's characterisation as transgressive, yet finds that censorship also works to secure the subcultural status of the true horror fan (p.105).

The fan accounts he considers tend to be framed within narratives of personal biography; within these, he finds a consistent reiteration of rationality superseding Romanticism. Such accounts, he argues, frame, restrict and rationalize the pleasures of horror no less than the academic approaches discussed in the preceding section. The pleasures of horrors, therefore, are no less problematic for the fan than for the scholar.

Ingeniously entitled 'Para-sites: Beyond Generic Horror', the third section looks at the manifestation of horror and its discursive framing in sites beyond film and fiction. Taking television and non-fiction narratives as his examples, Hills shows that outside film and literature horror is either relegated to a debased sub-cultural form, or ex-nominated, re-framed as Gothic TV or True Crime. He considers the hybrid and boundary-violating nature of such texts, and argues for their inclusion within consideration of horror genres for their shared tropes, devices and culturally assumed affects. This leads very naturally into the consideration of theoretical texts themselves as a sub-genre of horror, here labelled 'Theory-Horror'. Theory, Hills argues, is a further 'para-site' where tropes and structures of the genre circulate. He finds a parallel between fans' framing of discussion of the aesthetics of the horror text, and the devaluing of theoretical texts inherent in any consideration of their aesthetics, rendering them 'improper and monstrous forms of non-theory'. This has been true, for example, of the devaluing of feminist works (p.146). He explores the ways in which academic norms suppress the exploration of intertextual elements between theory and fiction and render them invisible; such examples as he does cite are, he argues, even structurally devalued through their being placed at the end of arguments. And yet, as it infects, he observes, the gothic also invigorates the theoretical text, violating a boundary and lending an illicit thrill to its reader. He goes on to discuss examples where features of theory may be identified as gothic in their structure and their appeal, such as Anne Williams' articulation of the unconscious as vampiric and her characterisation of Freud as Dr Van Helsing, convincing the sceptical of the strange and powerful threat, as an example (Williams 1995 p.245).

In the last section Hills looks at the postmodern pleasures of intertextuality – here, however, rather than going over well-trodden ground concerning intertextuality in relation to audiences and secondary texts, he draws attention to the intertextual practices within the texts themselves. He takes as examples the horror fictions of Kim Newnman and the *Scream* series. Through these texts, Hills argues that specific forms of intertextuality and its attendant pleasures can be seen to operate within horror, and uses Bourdieuan theory to interpret the texts themselves rather than their reception.

In his conclusion, Hills raises some questions concerning what he terms the ‘displeasures’ of horror. Why, he asks, does the failure to take pleasure in art-horror not seem to require exploration or justification? (p. 198) He indicates the need for further study of the reception of failed horror, or the ‘turning away’ from gore, and of those who refuse to watch horror at all.

This is an exciting account of the pleasures of horror that provokes further questions at every stage. It extends the field of horror criticism and audience studies, while establishing its arguments on the foundations of rigorous scholarship.

Reference

Williams, Anne (1995) *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic*, Chicago II and London: Chicago University Press

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