

Murray Leeder, *Horror Film: A Critical Introduction*
(New York: Bloomsbury, 2018)

Murray Leeder's *Horror Film: A Critical Introduction* is a recent entry in the Bloomsbury Film Genres Series, a film-studies collection that provides insight into the key works, major creative movements, and historical and social contexts that inform genres such as film noir, science fiction, historical fiction, and fantasy. As a critical introduction, Leeder's work is designed to be accessible for the non-specialist or beginner researcher in that it provides a detailed and considered overview of a range of horror films and their cultural relevance. Moreover, it also includes generous references to advanced critical readings and engages with complex questions regarding the horror genre.

The most vexing and rewarding of these questions, and the one around which the book centres itself, explores the definitions of horror as an often subdivided, miscategorised, and misunderstood film genre. In order to describe 'horror' in a logical yet comprehensive way, Leeder divides the book into three sections, examining, respectively, the historical progression of the genre, including the cultural contexts of key films and creative movements, the philosophical and critical theories which shape a cultural understanding of horror, and finally film's technological exploration of sound, colour, and format as a means of adding nuance to our understanding of horror's fundamental elements.

The first three chapters of Leeder's book are broken down by blocks of time encompassing major cultural and historical movements, starting in 1895 and ending in the last few years. They are further classified by insights into the influences that shaped horror's development, for example illustrating the impact of German Expressionism on works such as *The Cat and the Canary* (dir. by Paul Leni, 1927), or critiquing how television's 'Shock Theatre' programme in the 1950s facilitated the rise of exploitation-horror directors and producers such as Roger Corman. Thus, readers see the historical and creative developments, both large and small, which contributed to shifting perceptions of horror throughout the last century, and the resulting ambiguities that continue to exist in a genre that has given audiences both *The Silence of the Lambs* (dir. by Ted Tally, 1991) and *The Human Centipede* (dir. by Tom Six, 2009). Leeder starts his study with phantasmagoria and the first public screening of the 'Cinematographe' in Paris, a fitting strategy given his later discussion of contemporary film technologies and digital horror. The narrative then follows horror's many golden eras and stretches of time when it was subject to censorship; its influence on a range of national cinemas, which heavily impacted each other while also developing their own

unique identities; its deliberate engagements with period-specific anxieties, such as fear of foreign influences or of failures of national identity during wartime; and its frequent return to common themes, including those dealing with monstrosity, conformity, sexuality and gender, bodily and ideological purity, rationality, and more. These chapters acknowledge the contradictory identity of a genre that, in its central drive both to inspire and examine fear, encompasses both highbrow, 'elevated' films such as *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (dir. by Francis Ford Coppola, 1992) and schlocky, exploitative, low-budget offerings of the Hammer-Horror or 'splatter-film' variety. They also serve as a precursor to later attempts to define the often-fluid boundaries of horror itself and what it means to a film audience. Through this survey of movies, movements, and actors, as well as a discussion of historical contexts up to the present day, Leeder provides a comprehensive look at the overlap between specific socio-political issues and innovative developments in horror film.

The following section of *Horror Film* unpacks generic definitions further in its discussion of critical horror theories. These chapters are subdivided into the 'what', 'why', and 'who' of the genre: what horror is, why humans chose to experience and create horror, and who makes up the horror film audience. The initial chapter, 'What is Horror?', attempts to define genre in a more general sense, and once this discussion is applied to specific horror films, Leeder effectively reclassifies horror's generic flexibility as an opportunity for creativity, calling particular attention to the intersection of horror and comedy as a site which redefines generic boundaries significantly. Not content simply to list different theories, such as those related to the conventions of film, the connection between horror and comedy, or the anxieties of gender and sexuality in horror, Leeder also illuminates how these concepts link to, contradict, and develop through one another. In the chapter 'Mind and Body: The "Why?" of Horror', for example, the complex and sometimes contradictory readings of the Final-Girl figure in slasher films, such as those presented in well-known studies by Carol Clover and Barbara Creed, are unpacked in detail, before Leeder ultimately suggests the successful coexistence of myriad critical interpretations, a nuanced interpretation that both academic and non-academic readers can accept. Readers of all backgrounds will find something to enjoy in this central discussion of horror's generic identity, and of particular personal interest to the horror aficionado is the chapter 'Horror's Audiences, Critics and Censors'. This chapter provides in-depth insight into audience demographics, especially those divided by gendered assumptions, and explores why a diverse community of film enthusiasts return repeatedly to the genre as a source of fun and fascination.

The final three chapters of Leeder's work examine technologies and aesthetics – the layered representation of the complexities of fear and fear-inducing horrors on film – in order to contextualise and trace the development of what Leeder call 'the technological uncanny' (p. 160). The first two chapters in this section deal with cinematic sound and colour, respectively, and Leeder essentially reduces those elements to their most basic interpretations, a strategy that enables him to reinterpret films from *Nosferatu* (dir. by F. W. Murnau, 1922) to *Berberian Sound Studio* (dir. by Peter Strickland, 2012), and *The Masque of the Red Death* (dir. by Roger Corman, 1964) to *Suspiria* (dir. by Dario Argento, 1977). The absence, as well as the presence, of colour and sound receives significant attention within the context of cinematic representation, as lushly colourful films such as *Suspiria* contrast with intentionally black-and-white films such as *Martian* (dir. by George A. Romero, 1977) that employ 'monochromatic chic' in order to invoke an alternative aesthetic (p. 207). The technical as well as creative limitations of audio-visually depicting certain things on film are also acknowledged here, and H. P. Lovecraft fans will perhaps, along with Leeder, grieve the practical impossibility of filming a truly effective version of his 1927 short story 'The Colour Out of Space', as the original tale features a colour that is literally beyond human understanding and representation (director Richard Stanley's 2019 attempt notwithstanding).

The book fittingly ends with an examination of the impact that digital technologies, including CGI effects, have had on horror cinema, and the ways in which the resulting anxieties that new technologies inevitably bring, and that have shaped cinema since the earliest adaptations of *Frankenstein*, continue to impact horror narratives. Leeder argues that these developments offer new avenues for creative expression in subcategories such as found-footage horror, or in those films that utilise and examine technological 'glitches'. One recent example is the film *Unfriended* (dir. by Levan Gabriadze, 2014), in which widely circulated digital images constitute a new kind of afterlife and invoke a literal, and murderous, 'ghost in the machine', effectively rendering the digital body a site of abjection. Leeder's examinations of such films provide important meditations on the 'unrepresentability' of certain fundamental elements of horror, the manipulation of reality and the creation of new digital realities, and the evolving nature of contagion in the contemporary landscape.

The scope of Leeder's *Horror Film: A Critical Introduction* is impressive, and perhaps most remarkable is the author's appreciation of the circularity of horror, and indeed of cinematic expression as a whole. Concerns regarding the so-called 'end of horror' due to a perceived lack of film quality or frequent changes in technology are acknowledged in this

study, but are ultimately subverted, as Leeder demonstrates the endless renewability of the genre. Indeed, most evident throughout this work is the consistency with which horror defines and defies limitations, including those inherent in the suggestion that the genre has exhausted its creative potential. While methodologies, technologies, critical responses, audience perspectives, and creative movements have obviously changed since the earliest films in 1895, horror remains a significant form, in that it is constantly collapsing, restructuring, and reimagining itself, echoing its past and re-evaluating its future. This creative process is examined throughout Leeder's crucial, informative work in both the basic elements that make up individual films and the social and cultural influences with which such films engage.

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