



A COMPANION TO THE

HORROR FILM

EDITED BY
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Preface

Monsters are everywhere these days. They are on movie screens certainly, although oddly enough, not always in horror films. As Adam Charles Hart's chapter in this volume demonstrates, today monsters are at the very heart of Hollywood blockbuster action films and CGI spectacles, in franchises such as *The Hobbit* and *Pirates of the Caribbean*, films that few critics or scholars would likely classify as horror films *per se*. Monsters are also ubiquitous in animated kids films [*ParaNorman* (2012), *Frankenweenie* (2012)], television programming, video games, pornography (“dinosaur porn,” anyone?), advertising, music, and cultural happenings such as “zombie runs” and “Thriller” flash mobs. This reflects, I think, the fact that monsters are and always have been potent metaphors for just about any and all aspects of human experience. In the twenty-first century alone, they have been used—so far—to speak of teenage romance (the *Twilight* franchise), extreme rendition and enhanced interrogation techniques (torture porn), our ever-increasing surveillance culture (found footage horror films), and survival itself in a world whose infrastructure is crumbling—or at least appears to be (the proliferation of zombie apocalypse texts across all aspects of the media landscape). In its current form, the horror film itself may still be somewhat ghettoized in popular culture as a critic-proof, low-class, low-budget exploitation genre aimed at thrill-seeking teenagers, but the monsters the genre contains continue to fascinate. Putting it another way, monsters are not just for horror films anymore.

It goes without saying that the contributors to this volume understand horror films to be definitely more than low-class, low-budget exploitation flicks aimed at

“impressionable” young people and/or moral degenerates. That had been (and may still be) the view of the genre held by many critics and other social reformers supposedly concerned with the genre's allegedly negative effects on public health. As the chapters in this volume by Matt Hills, Kevin Heffernan, and Julian Petley explore, horror films have often been the instigator of “moral panics,” especially as each new generation of filmmakers seeks to outdo their predecessors in terms of gore, shock, provocation, and politically incorrect titillation. But those factors are themselves the building blocks of the genre, the blood-soaked façade that allows horror films to tackle social issues in ways no other genre can. A mainstream Oscar-winning film such as *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989) may take on racism in its own soft-pedaled, golden-hour kind of way, but the blood, guts, and smarts of a film such as *Tales from the Hood* (1995) arguably explores the topic in far more complex and nuanced ways. Horror films can say what other socially sanctioned genres often cannot.

My own personal history with the horror film began when I was a child, fascinated with their images of Otherness, images that I found both frightening and alluring. Many of the authors represented in this volume speak of similar attractions to the genre. Indeed, the genre is designed to arouse intense personal responses in its audiences, and people are known to be passionate about horror, loving it as life-long fans, or hating it just as much. And while much criticism has been heaped on the genre for its alleged appeal to audiences' sadistic impulses, that argument has also been countered by others that assert that the genre affords primarily masochistic pleasures. I do not think one simple explanatory paradigm can fully explain *anything* in popular culture, and as such, remind my readers that whether one loves or hates the genre (or is simply neutral toward it), it probably means different things to different

people. Readers familiar with my work will discern that my predominant interests lie more in gothic horror than in slasher or gore-hound horror, but I try not to privilege one form over the other (though it is sometimes hard not to) given the status of *all* horror as low or disreputable culture.

As is probably obvious by now, my interests in the horror film today relate to what has been broadly called the *reflective* nature of film genres, and especially the horror film. That is to say, film genres do not arise or exist *de novo*: they are made by and consumed by people within specific historical and sociocultural contexts, and as such they “speak” to those same people about the issues of the day. The insights offered by Robin Wood (1979) (among others) in the 1970s—on how the genre functions as a sort of collective nightmare, figuring any given culture's repressed and oppressed Others as monstrous—still permeate much horror film scholarship today, including this volume. But even if we discount psychoanalysis—as some contemporary cultural critics would have us do—we may still invoke Stuart Hall's (1980) “Encoding and Decoding” model: contemporary cultural studies approaches to film genre emphasize the semiotic and discursive relationship between texts, those who produce and consume them, and the larger spheres of culture and ideology. Cultural texts such as horror films tell us facts about the cultures in which they reside: details about gender, about sex, about race and class, about the body, about death, about pain, about being human, ultimately. Whether or not they speak to our repressed desires (and I think they do, whatever we understand repression to be), horror films nonetheless comment on and/or negotiate with multifarious cultural anxieties and fears, whatever they may be.

This volume contains 30 new chapters on various aspects of the horror film, many written by some of the most well-known and well-respected scholars on the subject. It was

designed to provide an introduction to (or overview of) various concepts in horror film scholarship, as well as explore older and newer films within different theoretical paradigms and/or sociohistorical contexts, drawing on primary resources and offering original scholarship on the subject. Although some of the chapters tend to gravitate toward one pole over the other, it was my consistent aim that all of these chapters be helpful and informative to novices, fans, and scholars alike. Thus, some chapters may read a bit like a primer, while others more closely resemble content in scholarly journals. All readers will hopefully encounter familiar faces, figures, and subgenres, as well as—to borrow the title of one infamous horror movie musical from 1964—an ever-expanding genre universe filled with “incredibly strange creatures who stopped living and became mixed up zombies.” A full chapter-by chapter-breakdown of the *Companion* follows, but a brief sampling of its somewhat unusual contents would have to include chainsaws mutating out of Japanese schoolgirls' butts, the rarely seen American Sign Language horror film *Deafula* (1975), Ken Russell's foray into the nunsploitation genre, “hopping vampire” action movies from Hong Kong, the cult fandom surrounding the so-bad-it's-brilliant *Troll 2* (1990), the potential camp appeal of *The Exorcist* (1973), and extreme niche horror films such as *Slaughtered Vomit Dolls* (2006). For the traditionalist, the volume also contains thoughtful explorations of *Dracula* (1931), *The Curse of Frankenstein* (1957), *Peeping Tom* (1960), *The Haunting* (1963), and *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), among many others. In short, this volume demonstrates one of the most exciting things about the horror film genre: it is an ever-changing and ever-expanding repertoire of the perverse and the abject. If one has the guts for it (if I can be pardoned the pun), I think it has much to tell us about the human condition.

Part I: Approaches and Contexts, explores some of the more important ways the horror film has been studied by scholars. It begins with a chapter by Aaron Smuts; it explores some of the cognitive and philosophical issues that the horror film raises, such as “Why do we like to be frightened?” Are the fears felt in horror films “real,” as compared to the fears felt in relation to events such as global warming, disease and death, or terrorist attacks? Perhaps unexpectedly, Smuts notes the difficulty in answering many of these sorts of questions, even as they continue to inspire thought and scholarship within those contexts. The next several chapters (by Chris Dumas, Daniel Humphrey, Christopher Sharrett, and Travis Sutton) explore in greater detail various psychoanalytic approaches to the genre, and comment on how it is used—following Robin Wood—to shape and delimit such “real life” discourses as gender, sexuality, race, class, and dis/ability. The final three chapters in this section turn to the contexts of horror film reception (Matt Hills), distribution and exhibition (Kevin Heffernan), and censorship (Julian Petley). These chapters are meant to ground and reply to (if not actually answer) some of the questions explored in previous chapters: just how do actual audiences interact with horror films? What pleasures do audiences find within them? How might their popularity be dependent on the historical and industrial processes of distribution and exhibition, rather than (or in addition to) what they might be saying in some coded psychoanalytic way? Julian Petley's chapter surveys a century of British and American censorship related to the horror film, noting how various waves of “moral panics” have contributed to the horror film's status as a “bad object.” (I. Q. Hunter's chapter in Part V, “Trash Horror and the Cult of the Bad Film,” engages with many of these same issues and can be productively read in conjunction with the final three chapters of Part I).

Part II: The Form of Horror, features three chapters that explore the stylistic dimensions of cinematic horror. Robert Spadoni's chapter, which surveys decades of critical reaction to the genre, attempts to explore what we really mean by mood and/or atmosphere, especially in relation to horror film narrative and mise-en-scene. In his discussion, Spadoni also draws on recent cognitive and philosophical work on emotions such as fear and dread, teasing out their implications for viewing audiences. Next, William Whittington's chapter on sound design in horror films draws on his similar work on science fiction sound; the chapter is both theoretical and grounded in the industrial practices and discourses of those who actually create sound for horror films. Invoking a basic distinction between "raw" and "refined" sounds, Whittington explores the many different ways that sound design can be used to startle, terrify, unsettle, and/or create related experiences of cognitive dissonance. Part II concludes with "Mellifluous Terror: The Discourse of Music and Horror Films" by Joe Tompkins. Engaging with some of the same ideas explored by Whittington in the preceding chapter, Tompkins surveys the history of horror film music and the different ways it can be used; he also considers how the musical avant-garde has been incorporated into the sound of horror.

Part III: A History of the (Western) Horror Film, sketches out the various twists and turns of the English-language horror film. Despite this, and as many of the chapters in this volume note, the Western horror film has always been international in its development, reach, and influence. It has roots in Eastern European folklore, gothic literature, and German expressionist cinema; by the twenty-first century, one strand of the English-language horror film seems devoted solely to remaking horror film hits from Spain, Japan, and Korea (among other nations). My own chapter begins this section by exploring some of those