

The Spaces and Places of Horror

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Series in Critical Media Studies

 **VERNON PRESS**

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www.vernonpress.com

In the Americas:
Vernon Press
1000 N West Street,
Suite 1200, Wilmington,
Delaware 19801
United States

In the rest of the world:
Vernon Press
C/Sancti Espiritu 17,
Malaga, 29006
Spain

Series in Critical Media Studies

Library of Congress Control Number: 2019942247

ISBN: 978-1-62273-742-0

Cover design by Vernon Press. Cover image by cocoparisienne from Pixabay.

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Acknowledgments

This volume was inspired by two wildly successful panels at the 48th Northeast Modern Language Association Annual Convention in Baltimore, Maryland in 2017, which we co-chaired and partook in with two presentations that have been revised to become this volume's introduction and one of its chapters; well before that, however, this volume was inspired by our shared love for all things horror, old Italian *giallo* films, and jump scares accompanied by a good glass of wine. We would like to first and foremost thank each and every one of our contributors, whose work, research, rigor, and enthusiasm made this volume possible and also made it an enlightening contribution to the scholarship on horror film; we selected essays that cover a wide range of filmic and thematic concerns and films from different decades and subgenres, and we are incredibly pleased with the final result.

We cannot thank Debbie Yum enough for all her help with the formatting of the final draft of the manuscript. We would also like to thank our publisher, and in particular Carolina Sanchez, Argiris Legato, and James McGovern—our liaisons with Vernon Press—for their guidance and patience amidst delays and revisions. A special mention goes to the Rutgers Italian department for supporting us as graduate students, and the Rutgers English Writing Program, and William Magrino in particular. Finally, we would like to thank our incredible husbands, Jonathan and Gil, our parents, and our pets.

Foreword

Bernadette Wegenstein

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The usual questions that arise when we think about horror are: why are we afraid, and why do we *want* to be afraid? While there are more answers to these questions than we have room for here, one answer we may advance is that we *want* to be afraid despite what would appear to be our own best interests. Perhaps this is because we know we are not “in” the space of horror but outside of it, in safety—a version of the appeal Kant ascribed to the sublime when he wrote that “the astonishment bordering on terror, the horror and the awesome shudder... is, in view of the safety in which he knows himself to be, not actual fear, but only an attempt to involve ourselves in it by means of the imagination, in order to feel the power of that very faculty” (*The Critique of Judgment*). In this sense the space of horror is first and foremost a mental space analogous to the reading practice ascribed by William Egginton to fiction (*The Man who Invented Fiction*), in which the reader’s self divides in two, existing outside a diegetic space while simultaneously represented within it.

Horror uses this division to explore the feeling of helplessness vis a vis the unknown, or to test the “thin line between the familiar and the unfamiliar,” as Pascuzzi and Waters point out in their introduction. Indeed, many subjects of horror have an unknown past, feel an alienation toward their own identity and are trying to work out such fundamental questions as *who am I?* or, *what is in me?* Such insecurity about one’s own identity points to the helplessness and innocence of a subject vis a vis the moment of her conception: “I wasn’t there and I could not contribute to it in any way.” Such feeling of powerlessness in the face of the “violence” of not being present at one’s conception and not being asked if one wanted to be a part of the human experience, and perhaps a consequent resentment toward one’s “creators,” is one that many horror films capitalize on. Further, horror spreads its tentacles toward an uncertain future: *what will become of me? Where will I go?* Or, more practically even, *where will I live?* as Pascuzzi and Waters identify in some horror films, such as *The Haunting in Connecticut*, that reflect the economic housing market crash in the U.S. Additionally, postcolonial and racial anxieties have long been the subject of horror films, a recent influential example being Jordan Peele’s

breakout film *Get Out*, about the fear of being eaten up or killed by whiteness. As the many horror film examples discussed in this book, both historical and contemporary, show so well, the genre of horror is above all *productive*. It is successful as a film genre. It varies culturally and historically. Thus it comes as no surprise that there are such things as a bimonthly “Sunday Blood Brunches” in New York where viewers are surprised with a horror movie from different time periods.

The Spaces and Places of Horror is a unique opportunity not just for academics but for anyone fascinated by this genre to immerse themselves in these questions in the most varied spaces and places of the world: outer space, inner space, and beyond, wherever horror might “take place” or be “imagined.”

Before I leave the viewer to their own experiences of immersive horror, from Korean zombie movies to the thalassophobia of the epic horror thriller *Jaws*, I would like to address the importance of this genre from a feminist perspective, namely, its ability to identify and empathize with the view-point and sensation of the *victim*. Surely, we are also experiencing the point of view of the villain in many horror movies, but this tends to be the exceptional point of view, as when Hitchcock activates the gaze of some yet unknown source of evil inside Norman Bates’s house. But the very premise of horror, it seems to me, is embedded in the main dramaturgical idea of the viewer’s identification with the position of victimhood, whether this be an actual victim in the storyline or a potential victim in the future, should we get past the shower scene. Horror is pitiless. It lets us feel how it is to be afraid, to be dominated, to be threatened, to be in the hands of the villain. According to the UN Women Facts and Figures page, it is estimated that “35 percent of women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or sexual violence by a non-partner (not including sexual harassment) at some point in their lives; and some national studies show that up to 70 per cent of women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence from an intimate partner in their lifetime.”¹ Given these numbers I think it is no surprise to find victimhood embodied by female characters but also many children to be one of the most dramatized subject positions in horror films.

The question thus arises of whether we would be better off not exploring such violence through the strategies of horror. Opinions about this question are often split. *The Nightingale* by Jennifer Kent, for instance, has been the subject of intense debate concerning whether such atrocity and violence as the brutal rape of an Irish woman in 19th-century Tasmania should be offered to an audience to see and swallow. One feminist response has been to point to the double standard in such a question, when we know that violence and rape by many male auteurs have been celebrated as artful. But there is even something more important than this response in my view. I think that the main

productive element of horror, no matter how unrealistic the subject may be, is the reality of fear. To be able to come close to the feeling of fear of death, rape, violence, or the aftermath of these, is the undenied accomplishment of cinema. Horror, in this sense, is also a feminist genre, because it is able to depict truthfully a state of mind of the victim, which more often than not are women.

As academics we know that is never enough to just study a phenomenon from one cultural or even historical point of view. The richness of this volume lies in the fact that it shows the universality of horror as an anthropological principle. Horror is a basic function in the process of human communication, stemming from identification and empathy with those suffering a violence otherwise unimaginable to us. To go back to the earlier question of why we want to be afraid, we might say that it is a matter of *knowing the source of fear* as much as we can, so as to dominate and tame it.

But why film? Film gives us the pleasure of engaging with horror, in the deepest way, while knowing that a safe space remains there for us. If the basic function of engaging in fiction is indeed to divide the self, such that one experiences the world and perspective of another subject while still remaining in one’s own world, horror is in some way the most extreme example of that division. By subjecting us to the abject, the depraved, the worst of our fears, all from the comfort of a cushy cineplex or cozy couch, horror can either reinforce the patterns and worldviews that permit such violence, or, ideally make us more attuned to it, and to the ways we ourselves may be perpetuating it.

Notes

¹ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures>