New Blood: Critical Approaches to Contemporary Horror, edited by Eddie Falvey, Joe Hickinbottom and Jonathan Wroot

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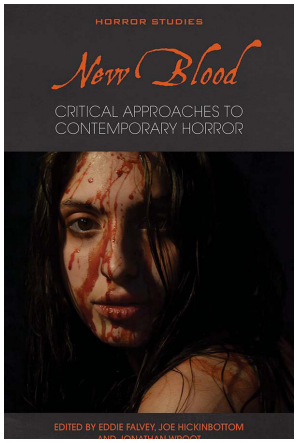

New Blood is a collection of essays examining recent works of horror film. Separated into four parts, the book largely acts as a defense for analyzing new horror films through a scholarly lens. Some of the essays are invested in reception studies and production methods, while others engage more in theory and interpretive analyses. Ultimately, many of the chapters seem to fall short of the book's intent, functioning more as an elevated film review than a work of serious scholarship. However, many chapters would be effective in teaching undergraduate classes in horror so could be included on syllabi for such courses.

The editors present a kind of defense of modern horror cinema as worthy of critical study in their introduction. What struck me here was that the defense was framed as a list of horror films, claiming that there have been both remakes and original films, an argument that generally should go without saying. Indeed, the editors seem to try to defend why the genre is popular more than why it is worthy of scholarly attention. We constantly see phrases such as, "some horror franchises have proven so popular that…" and "To understand the genre's enduring popularity…" (2, 3). The introduction continues to state the obvious: "Critical acclaim has been given in many cases – but whether praised or derided, horror has carried on regardless" (4). As a result of this set-up, it seems very unclear who the audience for the book really is. People who think horror stopped being a film genre in the 90s? Beginning horror scholars who are looking for definitive proof that the genre is indeed popular? After defining what the editors call "revisionist horror" (5) and talking further about the commercial aspects of the genre, they outline the various case studies.

In "Apprehension Engine: The New Independent 'Prestige Horror,'" David Church engages with "artsy" horror of the past couple of decades through the label "prestige horror" (16), discussing the sub-genre in terms of reception studies, critical acclaim, and cultural studies. What is compelling about Church's arguments is his discussions of indie "alternative" prestige films and the ways that many horror fans appreciate the art and poetry of films over the commercial scare factor. My greatest concern with Church's work is the limit of his scope. What he calls indie-art

films are reasonably commercial successes as well, such as *It Follows* (2014), *Saw* (2003), and *The Witch* (2015). There does not appear to be much room for horror shorts on YouTube or the much more indie films released only on Shudder.

The next essay, by Steve Jones, "Hardcore Horror: Challenging the Discourses of 'Extremity,'" seeks to give definition to the eponymous terms "hardcore horror" and "extremity." Jones focuses on market and critical definitions for "extremity," noting that a store's willingness to stock a horror film contributes to the market definition, as an example. The strength of this chapter is in its ability to give several specific cases, such as *mother!* (2017) and *A Serbian Film* (2010), while also acknowledging and giving room to the slippages of meaning of "extremity." Even tackling a bias toward extreme horror texts in academic publishing, Jones approaches the concept from so many angles I could see myself easily teaching this chapter alone alongside some horror films Continuing the focus on specific audiences, Xavier Mendik approaches cult horror festivals in "From Midnight Movies to Mainstream Excess." Mendik blends the personal with the critical effectively as he situates his experiences with a university horror film festival in the larger commercial industry of horror film. Like Church, Mendik is invested in terms like "prestige" and "success," although his scope is limited more narrowly to these specific film festivals.

Starting the book's second section, Joe Hickinbottom's "A Master of Horror?: The Making and Marketing of Takashi Miike's Horror Reputation" is more of a fan's defense of Miike as a "horror auteur" than a work of serious critical inquiry. It even goes so far as to answer the titular question in just the first couple of pages, rendering the rest of the chapter uninteresting. This chapter might have been better placed as an introduction to a volume just on Miike. Asian horror continues with "Bloody Muscles on VHS: When Asia Extreme Met the Video Nasties" by Jonathan Wroot. Easily one of the sharpest chapters in the book, Wroot's conducts a reception studies and comparatist reading of J-horror film *Bloody Muscle Body Builder in Hell* (2014). What impressed me with this chapter was the vast amount of research Wroot conducted: into VHS production history, the trends of VHS nostalgia in the 21st century, and the theory behind J-horror's reception.

Thinking about film in the 21st century, one, of course, cannot forget the popularity of streaming services like Netflix, as Matt Hills notes in "Streaming Netflix Original Horror: *Black Mirror*, *Stranger Things*, and Datafied TV Horror." Like Wroot, Hills brings in considerable theory, focusing on postmodern readings of what he calls the "flagships" of "datafied horror" (125): *Stranger Things* and *Black Mirror*. He excels at analyzing concepts unique to Netflix, discussing "bingeing on fear" and the distinctions of genre bubbles that separate Netflix from something specifically geared toward horror fans like Shudder (130).

The next part, focused on subgenres of modern horror, begins with Jessica Balanzategui's chapter, "The digital gothic and the Mainstream Horror Genre: Uncanny Vernacular Creativity and Adaptation." Balanzategui is invested in exploring the collaborative efforts that go into Creepypasta stories and the gothic elements that appear in them. This chapter would be really beneficial for introductory students of horror, showing them that even those stories they read

online "count" as genuine literature. However, I wish Balanzategui integrated more Gothic theory and scholarship into the chapter, making that bridge between academic theory and popular fiction more apparent. Abigail Whitall envisions "rethinking subgenres and cycles" in "Nazi Horror, Reanimated" (167). In this chapter, Whitall makes the basic argument that Nazi horror should be considered a subgenre rather than a cycle. While convincing, the argument seems very simple and easily defensible to scholars who would be reading this book.

The final subgenre explored is the "desktop film" in "Digital Witness: Found Footage and Desktop Horror as Post-cinematic experience," by Lindsay Hallam. In discussing the subgenres of found footage films here, Hallam integrates not only directors' quotations but actually really strong affect theory and social media theory, making the chapter shine for its integration of scholarship alongside its analysis of primary texts. This chapter could serve as the basis of an entire course syllabus. Eddie Falvey then discusses feminine monstrosity in "Revising the Female Monster: Sex and Monstrosity in Contemporary Body Horror." When I first read the chapter, I was frustrated with its survey nature. I had hoped there would be something more in-depth here. However, the chapter excels at being just that: a captivating survey. This chapter would be great for undergraduates to read, as it opens up many compelling conversations about sex, gender, disability, and even STDs in horror.

The political theme continues with Thomas Joseph Watson's "The Kids are Alt-Right: Hardcore Punk, Subcultural Violence and Contemporary American Politics in Jeremy Saulnier's *Green Room*." *Green Room* (2015) is certainly a horror film worthy of academic analysis. However, aside from the occasional quotation here and there, this chapter felt like an extended film review that summarized what a lot of other critics have said about the film. The last chapter is "Twenty-first-century Euro-snuff: *A Serbian Film* for the Family," by Neil Jackson. In contrast to the previous chapter, this one thrives on literary theory to analyze a film that many would dismissively call "torture porn." Jackson relies on affect theory and allegorical interpretations to derive new meaning from the film. The film thus becomes a site of investigation and critical inquiry that opens the way for other scholars (whether they are established researchers or undergraduates).

On the whole, the book seems conflicted. Half of it consists of simple arguments such as, "This is a film I enjoy, and here's why," and "This film is popular"; the other half actually engages in productive film theory and academic discourse. I would highly recommend these chapters to instructors teaching undergraduate horror courses. Those chapters open the floor for productive discussions of the genre and showcase what that kind of horror analysis can look like.

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