Household Horror: Cinematic Fear and the Secret Life of Everyday Objects, by Marc Olivier

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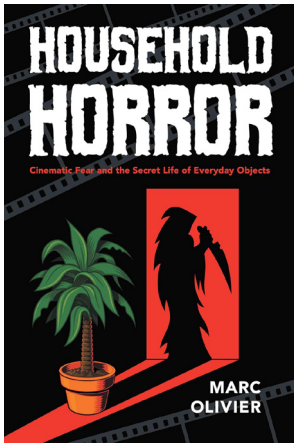

The underlying idea of Olivier's study, namely that objects in horror films are more than they seem, is probably intuitively evident to anyone who has ever watched a horror movie. But rather than focus on the props that come to mind—the haunted houses and cursed objects—Olivier attends to objects that sit on the margins of the plot and seem to be benign, familiar, and even mundane.

Olivier's object-oriented readings of horror films offer detailed analyses which illuminate the 'secret lives' of these domestic objects on screen. This object-led approach is also reflected in the book's structure and its visualization: *Household Horror* takes the reader on a tour of an apartment and guides them through four sections titled "Kitchen/Dining Room," "Living Room," "Bedroom," and "Bathroom," each containing chapters on objects which we would expect to find in these rooms (for example, the "Bathroom" contains chapters on the "Radiator," discussing Lynch's *Eraserhead* [1977], on "Pills" which probes the medicated female body in *The Bad Seed* [1956], *Rosemary's Baby* [1968], and *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* [2005], and lastly the famous "Shower Curtain" from *Psycho* [1960]). The floor plan of a one-bedroom apartment preceding the first chapter functions as an additional flat, visual table of contents mapping all of the objects discussed in the book. This structure already illustrates Olivier's approach. Rather than ordering his analyses according to "traditional strategies of coherence such as chronology, country, director, and subgenre," readers are free to "roam" among the object-themed chapters (2), which can be read in any order.

In the short introductory chapter, Olivier establishes the theoretical orientation of the following analyses. Setting out to follow objects' 'secret lives,' the book announces its inspiration by reference to work within the material turn that seeks to decenter the hierarchical organization of humans and objects. Olivier cites Ian Bogost and his elaboration of object-oriented ontology (OOO) as the basis for "treat[ing] objects as beings that surpass the roles given to them as props or decor" (3). This re-perspectivization recovers the various pieces of furniture, tools, and devices that form the unremarkable tapestry of everyday life from the background and grants them center

stage. Viewed through the lens of OOO, horror films, Olivier argues, turn this domestic landscape inside out and foreground humble objects as central participants on a par with humans.

Methodologically, Olivier combines a range of approaches, two of which seem to be particularly characteristic of his project: He takes the reader on contextual excursions into the histories, inner workings, and material make-up of objects, detailing their usually obscured or forgotten 'lives' on their own terms and then tying them back into the films. For example, one of the objects in the first section, "Kitchen/Dining Room," is the microwave which Olivier reads as a pivotal element in *Gremlins* (1984): "The microwave is a gremlin-sized chamber of atmospheric terror rooted in wartime research, embroiled in spy scandals and health scares—it is an inspirer of tabloid stories and urban legends and possibly the least understood device in the kitchen" (30). It is, Olivier suggests, much more than a convenient appliance as its public and imaginary lives complicate its status as a mundane domestic appliance, not the least, because microwave ovens are a relatively recent addition to kitchens. Their new owners in the 1980s were particularly fascinated by rumors and sensationalized stories about the dangers of microwaves, because the technology evokes the threat of nuclear radiation (35). This residual uncanniness of objects seems to emerge from their incomplete domestication due to their relatively recent adoption in homes. Mining the history of the refrigerator, sewing machine, and typewriter, Olivier provides compelling interpretations of their roles in *Possession* (1981), *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), *Carrie* (1976), and *The Shining* (1980) and includes readings that draw out the complicated processes of domestication that these technologies underwent. Their horror, Olivier's readings also suggest, lies in their continued, but obscured, connections with histories and networks outside the home. Other object-led excursions consist in attending to the inner workings of devices, offering physical routes into black-boxed objects, as Olivier demonstrates with regard to call tracing in *Black Christmas* (1974), where "The call is taking place not only at two ends of a phone line but also at a police station and in a switching station" (60). Olivier then dwells on the latter as much as on the former two locations and opens up a constitutive but hidden space within the network. In this way, histories and technologies that lead outside the films (and outside the home) are reinserted into the analyses in a movement reminiscent of Elaine Freedgood's 'old' materialist "strong metonymic reading" (see her *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* of 2006) which recovers the cultural and historical meanings of objects outside the literary text and then weaves them back into the narratives.

Olivier further centers objects through the straightforward but effective strategy of translating plots into lists (4). This re-segmentation based on the object rather than subject, assisted by phrases that highlight the non-human agent, as in "table events" (80, *Noriko's Dinner Table* [2005]), "remote-control phenomena" (123, *Poltergeist* [1982]), "bed scenes" (184, *The Exorcist* [1973]), or "typographic events" (212, *The Shining*), subtracts human agents and provides inventories instead (also the diagram of phone calls in *Black Christmas*, 56). The 'inventory' is a key figure and programmatic device in Olivier's study to which he returns in the brief conclusion: "*Household Horror* takes a simple inventory of household objects, explores the deformations caused by their

presence in cinematic horror, and produces new objects as readings" (312), relying on the "gentle knot of the comma" (312, quoting Bogost).

Household Horror is a readable and jargon-free study that demonstrates the benefits of object-led analyses through the sheer range of illuminating case studies rather than abstract theory. Reading it from cover to cover, as I have done following the protocols for reviewing academic monographs, is probably less effective than picking and choosing chapters that are of interest either because of the films they analyze or the objects featuring in them. The book, or rather its individual chapters, would thus be of interest not only to students and researchers of horror but also to anyone wondering how film (and, indeed, literary studies) can put OOO into interpretative practice.

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