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Amanda Rutherford
Richard Pamatatau *Editors*

Contemporary Horror on Screen

An Evolving Visual Narrative

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When machines fail, when technology fails, when the conventional religion fails, people have got to have something. Even a zombie lurching through the night can seem pretty cheerful compared to the existential comedy/horror of the ozone layer dissolving under the combined assault of a million fluorocarbon spray cans of deodorant.

—Stephen King, *The Mist*.

*We dedicate this book with love...to our
mothers.*

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Chapter 1

Introduction



Sarah Baker and Amanda Rutherford

Historically, horror films have always been based on real-life issues and fears, with social commentary threaded into stories of fiction such as the body snatchers, slashers, or supernatural monsters for example. Odell and LeBlanc (2010) described the horror film genre as having ‘a fearsome reputation, dismissed by critics and pilloried by the media. Yet it is hugely popular, diverse in content and as old as cinema itself’ (7). Standing as an allegorical commentary on issues facing the world and society, one of the most noticeable examples of this can be seen in the 1965 film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, where aliens invade a small town, and take over the bodies of the townspeople, leaving them as merely a shell of their former selves. At the time the film addressed the fears surrounding communism, and the renewed terror of the ‘Other’, while providing a means to deal with the Cold War and the anxieties associated with the Atomic Age. In addition, ‘Most great horror monsters are stand-ins for some cultural anxiety like fear in the atomic age or scientific overreach or racism’ Zionman (2018). While everyday fears are a part of the horror genre, *Halloween* (1978) for example, which was one of the highest grossing independent films of all time, became the foundation text for the slasher films that were to become popular throughout the 1970s and 1980s (Clasen and Platts 2019). Clasen and Platts (2019, 1) argue that ‘slasher films reflect their sociocultural context, specifically a large-scale shift in values in American culture’. They apply pressure to what Stephen King calls ‘national phobic pressure points’ (King 1983, 5). A key trend to emerge from these slasher films was the portrayal of the final girl, the female character who ultimately survives, and a representation that changed the agency that women had previously shown in horror film (Clover 2015). There have been key trends in horror since around

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2009; Since the mid-2000s, horror films have altered to reflect the complex era with eclectic casts and stories that embrace more diversity (Sheasby 2018). This diversity is now seen with far more films made with people of color, LGBTQ characters, and other previously overlooked groups represented (Eddy 2019). However, the place of women in horror continues to be complicated, with roles particularly in horror which can be analyzed and critiqued, and many of these are examined in this collection.

One of the most notable current trends is the move to feminist tales, including *The Babadook*, *Halloween* (2018), which is a revisioning of the earlier *Halloween* (1978) film, produced in the #MeToo era, and stories that embrace race diversity like *Get Out* (2017), and *Us* (2019). More recently, the horror genre has also seen an increase in production, popularity, and critical appeal, with a collection of films since 2017 including *It*, *Get Out*, and *Annabelle: Creation* (2018) followed with *A Quiet Place*, *Halloween*, *Insidious: The Last Key*, *The First Purge*, *Hereditary*, and *The Nun*. For many critics 2018 was a banner year for horror, and part of the new horror renaissance which began in 2017, ‘throwing up countless films of genuine vision and ambition—often on the smallest of budgets—gifting audiences everything from character driven, studies in tension, to gore-flinging yuck-fests, via psychedelic revenge fantasies’ (Colegate 2018). Some of these 2018 films such as *Hereditary*, *A Quiet Place*, *Suspiria*, and *Annihilation* were critically acclaimed, and presented different approaches to horror. In *Suspiria*, for example, motherhood is explored with ethnic nationalism, while *Hereditary* and *A Quiet Place* featured strong female lead characters who performed their roles with a depth and individuality often not depicted in horror.

Bacon (2019) argues that it is difficult to define the genre of horror due to the various types that exist; from slasher, the supernatural, to the violent, it is a genre that has different origins with different countries producing their own versions of film. He asks why some horror from fifty to one hundred years ago seems as important as it did when it was first made. This book engages with these variations of horror looking at the genre as a conversation over current issues and social anxieties. Some of these issues are finding new ground in horror, such as the environmental or climate horror, reflecting current social engagement and the fear of the climate emergency. Other contemporary texts also refer to historical issues that have impacted society before and continue to cause problems. Women in horror reflect the ongoing struggle of female representation and current views on #MeToo for example. However, this collection engages with environmental, political, and family horror in a fresh way, demonstrating that horror genre has moved into a forceful collision with these issues. Importantly, this collection also engages with horror that centers black experience in modern life. It continues an examination of race that other scholars such as Robin R. Means Coleman have explored in previous work. For example, Coleman says that ‘the boundary-pushing genre of horror film has always been a site for provocative explorations of race in American popular culture’ (2022, i). Importantly, this collection then pushes further into films that engage with issues of race. As Coleman argues ‘If horror was rendered a niche study in the so-called scholarly canon, then

one can only imagine the ways in which *Black* horror was marginalized' (2022, xiii). The distinction with this collection is that it is engaging in areas that have, at times, been relegated. We look to the way that this new engagement with subject matter is approached.

The use of the terms such as 'elevated', 'smart', or 'post' horror has been seen by some as controversial. Rose (2022) however, contends that irrespective of the label used, 'we can surely agree something extraordinary was happening in cinema in the mid-2010s'. Some film series have made their mark in horror, like *The Conjuring* universe, and the published work of outstanding horror authors like Stephen King, have been reproduced and extended upon in film, producing modern-day terror in films such as *It* (2017), and *It Chapter Two* (2019). These films that fit the new terms of elevated, smart, and/or post-horror signal a change to a heightened popular cultural appreciation for the genre. Ford (2022) contends that 'the past half decade has seen a cultural revolution in the American horror genre, moving away from the funhouse thrills of yore and towards refined, artistic expression'. This has no doubt been influenced 'by the emergence and increasing acceptance of the category of "smart cinema", the designation of "smart" or "elevated horror" arose as a shorthand to describe this recent spate of horror films exemplified by *Get Out* -box office high performers that have been lauded by critics for their cerebral narratives and pointed social criticism' (Graves 2017, 127). Some put the horror doldrums down to a change in how the genre was expressed.

Hantke (2010), however, argues that American horror film had been in trouble since the mid-1990s through the turn of the century and had fallen into a slump. He stated that at that time, the 'American horror film [was] in crisis. Not that no more horror films [were] being made; on the contrary, as far as popularity and profitability go, the American horror film seems near the top of its game as Hollywood lavishes a steady stream of horror film upon its audience'. He concluded that there was however, a 'sense of fatigue or outright dissatisfaction with Hollywood horror' during this period (Hantke 2010, 7).

Much has changed since then, and with the steady increase in exceptional horror production of recent years, Rose (2022) coined the term post-horror, as a term to refer to the range of critically acclaimed and popular horror films made since 2010. Where the older conventions worked for the slasher movies, and demon possessions, it is now often the engagement with contemporary political issues that has come to the fore in the genre. After the many iterations of *Paranormal Activity* (2007–present) or *Saw* films (2004–2021), the genre has seen the emergence of change through films like *The Conjuring* franchise (2013–2021), the *Killing of a Sacred Deer* (2017), *It Comes at Night* (2017), *It* (2017), *Hereditary* (2018), and *Us* (2019), that have continued and expanded upon these new representations, and this book seeks to explore these popular contemporary horror stories, as their value and significance should be highlighted since their role morphs to project the real-world concerns of today. Thus, the run of films that fill the category of 'elevated', 'smart', and 'post' horror creates a clear trend that this collection discusses in detail. Films such as *Get Out* (2017) for example are observed, having emerged in a particularly volatile time in

contemporary American politics, exhibiting a tone in the terror which ‘contemplated the existential terror of race’ (Thrasher 2017).

Brigid Cherry (2009, 10) states that the horror genre has evolved, transforming, and hybridizing over time to offer its viewers variations on a theme. Many genres have lost and gained over time in popularity, yet horror remains ever strong and significant in present-day popular culture. Its longevity can be explained by the expansion of the conceptual categories and audiences that enjoy the various subgenres, and hybrid forms. ‘Genre films, because they are made as economic “units” that rely on formulaic narratives that are especially vulnerable to reflecting a dominant ideology, are more likely to be barometers of the cultural moment. They meaningfully address contemporary issues and reflect cultural, social or political trends’ (Cherry 2009, 11). Whether horror is being presented as a variation on existing horror film, as a combination with elements from other genres, or as a new form of horror, it is certainly gaining ground within popular culture. Therefore, this collection focuses on those transformative elements that horror has demonstrated in recent years and examines where contemporary horror is focused on in terms of subject matter, representation, and direction, while offering insight into some of the many contemporary variations, including those outside of the American horror film industry. The ability of the horror genre to morph and reflect these trends is also examined, and the results have made for an interesting addition to the horror canon, as the book surveys horror in sections through the highly volatile and troublesome arenas of politics, family, faith, and the threat of environmental collapse.

The authors reflect upon these new and prominent iterations of horror within three areas, emphasizing how horror continues to evolve in tune with present-day concerns. The first section is based on the threat of the environment as horror, where existential threat and apocalyptic narratives pose as a threat on humanity. As a major point of contemporary terror, this topic plays out in news stories and global fears every day, where uncontrolled actions facilitate adverse climate impacts and an impending annihilation of humanity through an earth that cannot sustain itself. Following this section is an examination into another large area of current anxiety, where the threat of the disintegration of families and communities come from both within the self and that of other influencers, including the supernatural, ritual, and curses, examining how these act as destructive powers in our everyday homes. The final section discusses the horrors of veiled political agendas and poor leadership and shows how nations can revolt against their people in the pursuit of power. We live in a world of many threats and social upheavals that are often created through the horror of corrupt leadership. The election of United States President Donald Trump in 2016, and some of the uncertainty that came during this period are discussed, noting a key starting point to the changes witnessed in politicalized contemporary horror. In addition, the period has brought to the fore, a representation of the culture clashes that have erupted, including but not limited to the Black Lives Matter and the *#MeToo* Movements. In this respect horror films help people visualize, understand, and negotiate their way through turbulent times.

These contributions discuss not only the current trends in mainstream Hollywood film and viewership, but also, they look to the expression of Latino, French,

Japanese, and Philippine films to examine how different cultures and communities are expressing their anxieties through horror. As the world was gripped by the onset of the COVID-19 virus, the dread of suffering and death became real to every person across the globe, and as such a special and innovative opening chapter emerged from Todd Platts and Amanda Rutherford on how people responded during the pandemic by what they call ‘panic watching’ of pandemic type films in the hope of finding solutions to ease their heightened fears, long periods of isolation, and loneliness. Using the films *Outbreak* (1995) and *Contagion* (2011) as a base to discuss the horror of an emerging worldwide epidemic, the authors note that cinematic output has served as a cultural reference point for hopes, dreams, concerns, and fears of societies for more than a century. Horror is an expression of what is deeply rooted in the human psyche, and this opening chapter offers insight into the reasons why horror film viewership received a massive boost as it became a form of comfort during these unprecedented times. They contend that films become a vicarious channel to experience emotions of distress and audiences have looked to the past to understand specific traumas related to the current pandemic. The out-break narrative they argue, is the place where the narrative has become a parable for our fears, evolving to depict the horrors of contagion, and of monsters, and allows for audiences to process the changing cultural anxieties of the present times.

In his chapter, *When corporate biology gets caught up with Mother Nature: An analysis of the Netflix viral horror The Rain*, Richard Pamatatau brings the focus to environmental horror, discussing how there is a collective memory of fear and fascination with residues of plagues from the past. While *The Rain* (2018) posits a modern speculative future that has been destroyed by a lethal lab-generated virus, the horror stems from the fact that one of our most vital substances for life, the rain, is contaminated. There is no escaping the destruction and loss of life in a world under such catastrophic threat, and the author discusses how the environmental horror of contamination by water plays out, reminding readers of the fragility of the world that we live in. Here, children are abandoned in isolated bunkers as a desperate way to keep them alive and shows how the series echoes the contemporary threat of acts of viral warfare, presenting us with an inevitability that could so easily face us.

The existential threat in the chapter *Representations of environmental apocalyptic horror in Greenland*, by Amanda Rutherford, explores an apocalyptic threat to the Earth from a passing comet. As debris impacts the ground vast areas across the Earth are severely compromised, and this chapter re-shapes the outlook of nature and landscape into a monstrous space of death and disaster. The visual horrors are not unlike that of a threat of nuclear attack and the author examines the nature of a large-scale devastation event, and the fragility of life in our present-day tumultuous world. In addition, the chapter examines the play on power and government control over information, showing how, even in times of great crisis, some people are still considered more worthy of saving than others, leaving the majority to perish under this apocalyptic collapse.

Fernando Pagnoni Berns examines objects within the environment as killers in his chapter *From Hsss! To OOO: The New cycle of Killer Objects*. Berns looks at our increasingly posthuman world, where inanimate objects have become a foundational

stone of new horror. Using the framework of Object-Oriented-Ontology he notes that killer objects within environments such as dolls, boats, houses, or even laundry folding machines have their place in horror and argues that the new cycle of horror films at times reflects the human influence as less important as a source of terror, where the real threat are the objects that surround us. Using films such as *In Fabric* (2018), *The Boat* (2018), *Annabelle: Creation* (2017), and the *Child's Play* franchise (1988), to name a few, he shows how films led by murderer objects have increased in numbers.

Part Two of the collection begins with *Hereditary* (2018), a film about the horrors that occur in families. Beginning with the death of the matriarch, the film progresses to reveal that what was initially believed to be a family suffering from mental health issues is in fact a family suffering from intergenerational curses and the involvement of a cult. The family home, rather than locking troubles out, is instead the place of intergenerational dysfunction, and a family destroyed by a demon and his followers. The chapter by Sarah Baker explores how trauma and grief are reimagined in innovative ways in the horror film. It serves as a reminder that the home and family are also dangerous places of threat and not just sanctuaries of security. 'When no longer an anchor of safety and security, the home can come to represent horror of the most terrifying and inescapable kind: that which lies within' (Crittenden 2019, 24). This chapter is a fitting start to this section as a film that is seen as part of the renaissance of filmmaking.

Thomas Shaw's *Haunted Churches, Wicked Schools, Addressing Postcolonial History through Philippine Horror* uses films such as *Seklusyon* (2016), and *Eerie* (2018), as case studies for the examination of post-gothic rituals and curses in the cultural contexts which shape the narratives of Filipino daily lives, where trauma histories are manifested under multiple colonialisms in the Philippines. He also examines the thought and influence in film of the Filipino reverence for nature, mythology, and the spirits, discussing the tensions between representations of the church, good and evil, and the Philippine position on a wider scale, while providing a welcome investigation of horror in a country and society that is often excluded from most writing on horror.

Guy Webster's chapter on *A Ghost Story* examines the film as part of a new kind of horror with the terms post-horror and smart horror. In this version of new horror, the film was said to have rethought the affective experience associated with the conventional horror film, and appeared to create loftier ambitions as a melancholic, dreamy affect with audiences provoked into an encounter with existential angst on the meaning of life as well as horror.

In the chapter *Shifting Subjectivities: Adopting the perspective of the Other in Mother and Get Out* Melanie Robson expands upon the discussion on families by looking at internal and familial threats and gendered and racial violence. She argues that *Mother* resonates with a growing public awareness of gendered violence and male control over female bodies and shows how African American characters in horror are usually the victims who are stripped of their agency. She notes the changes seen in the rise of post-horror films like that of *Get Out* and the increasing account of the psychological state of its characters.

The presence of the child is another area of importance in contemporary horror, and in the chapter on *Pedophobiac Audiences: Mapping the presence of the child in horror cinema*, Lancy Kurakar and Deeptha Achar show how the child is a staple ingredient of the horror genre. They argue that while children had a limited repertoire of roles toward the mid-twentieth century, they are now capable of metamorphosing into the incurable delinquent, villain, or murderer. The child, they conclude, in J-horror and its American counterpart is a case in point; the former rarely, if ever, vilifies childhood, while the latter will inculcate the child, superimpose childhood innocence with evil, and cast suspicion on all appearances of innocence, triggering a sense of dread and anxiety. This chapter traces the representation of childhood in horror films, primarily Hollywood, with respect to the changing cultural attitudes of audiences toward childhood. It is argued that popular anxieties surrounding genetics, adoption, delinquency, psychopathy, proper parenting and family dysfunction, and xenophobia make possible the contemporary ‘terrible child’.

The final discussion in this section comes from Madeleine Crutchley, with *Good for Her: Ready or Not's Final Girl and the Rich, Patriarchal Family as Monster*. Crutchley argues that with the release of *Ready or Not* in 2019, mainstream Hollywood horror saw a revival of the slasher staple, the ‘Final Girl’. In present-day horror, the Final Girl has become a prominent feature, with various theorists such as Kinitra D. Brooks, Lucia Palmer, and Kelly Wilz, who have continued to investigate the subconscious cultural ideologies of these representations, building upon the theory to engage with the way race, class, and sexuality is also represented within contemporary horror films. Through close analysis of *Ready or Not*, the author follows Grace as she battles the rich, white Le Domas family in their own ancient ritualistic game, showing this dysfunctional family as monstrous.

The third section of the collection is based on the horrors of political agenda and leadership. In our present world many are concerned by the changing values and accountability of their leaders. Todd Platts’ chapter *The It Duology: An integrated Analysis of mainstream horror in the 2010s* discusses *It* (2017) and *It: Chapter 2* (2019) and its allegorizing of Trump in the character Pennywise, a bully who divides people through manipulating fears and who is defeated through camaraderie and solidarity. Within his analysis he argues that the films have connections to the clown-related terror, and to the Trump state of political affairs, characterized by demagogic buffoonery, chaos, and unpredictable governing. Bringing together disparate arguments, he proposes that they contain both reactionary and progressive elements, that tap into contemporary and deep-seated fears that the Trump era contained. Within this chapter however, Platts notes the ambivalence that the lampooning of Trump existed with, and that the films challenge the dominant ideologies of gender, race, and group while simultaneously reproducing them.

Miguel Cesar’s chapter *Why isn't There Anybody? Isolation and Loneliness in Kurosawa's Kiyoshi's Pulse* addresses the impact of technology in horror discourses and stories in contemporary Japan. Cesar argues that ‘Motifs of emptiness, alienation, and isolation were articulated in contemporary horror cinema through the *mise-en-scene* of techno-horror, and the urban loneliness of a hyper-real society’. His chapter explores how Japanese horror reflects changes in society, with forced modernization

creating narratives of technology gone mad. Many of the Japanese horror films, therefore, deal with issues of loneliness and lack of connection, and reflect the themes of suicide where the dominant form of horror is sourced in the dominance of the technological. Edmund Cueva enters another area of contemporary horror which has not been discussed as much as other areas of diversity. This is the interrelationship between the American film industry and the United States Latinx population. He argues that there is a complete, conspicuous nonexistence in the American horror film of characters and plots that reflect or include the Latinx population. Hollywood often tries to combat the lack of minorities in film, but Cueva argues that nothing really changes, and while African American representation in horror has increased, in films like Jordan Peele's *Get Out*, members of the Latinx ethnic and racial minorities are still largely ignored in the horror film industry, even when some of the most well-known directors in the genre are from this neglected community. He suggests that the American film industry has not factually and intrinsically portrayed or embodied ethnics and minorities and has instead created them and provided its audience with an experience of them.

The final chapter in this section comes from David Da Silva entitled *The horror film and Donald Trump: The revenge of minorities*, which examines how horror films are reflecting the pressing social movements in America, Black Lives Matter, and #Metoo. This chapter has an interesting new take on film, beginning with a look at how film often extrapolates the feel and emotions generated by American political leaders. He refers to the emergence of the action genre in the period of the Regan presidency, and then explains how Donald Trump has created such a sense of terror and fear within America that it is now the horror genre that has led the way in addressing these anxieties. Looking at the #Me Too movement and *Black Lives Matter* the author used the work of Jason Blum to show the critical stances that are being made on these important concerns, demonstrating how far horror has come in its ability to provide social commentary. Notably, the films largely examine the 'inner demons' of the nation as Da Silva refers to it. This chapter therefore culminates in an overall assessment of the power of horror films to critique and embolden discussion around some of the most pressing concerns that continue to surface in the twenty-first century.

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Part I
The Environment and Climatic Apocalyptic
Events as a Threat on Humanity

Chapter 2

Panic Watching: On the Function of Consuming Fictional Pandemics During a Real Pandemic



Todd K. Platts and Amanda Rutherford

For more than a century, cinematic output has often served as a cultural reference point for widely felt hopes, dreams, triumphs, aspirations, concerns, and fears of a given society (Dehority 2020, 1898; Kellner 2010, 18–34). Though cinema most commonly reflects the time in which it is conceived, produced, distributed, and consumed (Platts 2013, 551–553), it can also give voice to transhistorical phenomena, conditions that are not bound to a specific period of time, but are deeply rooted in the human psyche (Clasen 2017, 23–34), and offer visions that transcend the context of its historical moment by imagining future possibilities (Kellner 2010, 14, 34–40). The constant barrage of news and information during the COVID-19 pandemic has created an unabating sense of grief, an increasing circle of mourning, and the realization that no one is immune (Stacey 2021). Therese Rando argues that individuals need to have something to hold onto during periods of grief (1985, 1993), and that the use of ritual is especially important during these times. One such ritual is ‘acting out’ as a means to discharge tension. We argue that at times, film becomes a vicarious channel to experience these emotions of distress, and that for these reasons, people have often looked to past rather than present films to understand difficult cultural moments such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Tom Gunning reminds us, that it is not that social trauma triggers the production of certain types of films, but that we come to better understand trauma through the use of film (paraphrased in Darby 2017) with specific film types more adept at handling particular traumas than others; in our case outbreak/pandemic films.

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