

Journal of European Popular Culture  
Volume 9 Number 2

© 2018 Intellect Ltd Review. English language. doi: 10.1386/jepc.9.2.131\_5

## REVIEW

### **DON'T LOOK: REPRESENTATIONS OF HORROR IN THE TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY SYMPOSIUM, UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH, 28 APRIL 2018**

*Reviewed by Máiréad Casey, NUI Galway*

1. Twenty-first-century reality and twenty-first-century horror are becoming  
2. ever more indistinguishable. Omnipresent cultural and political anxieties bred  
3. from the presidency of Donald Trump, the rise of right-wing politics in Europe  
4. and the United States, Brexit and a series of ever-escalating immigration crises  
5. inform the content and execution of contemporary horror. The organizers of  
6. 'Don't Look: Representations of Horror in the Twenty-First Century', Tom Day  
7. and John Lynsey, are positioned within the disciplines of art history and film  
8. studies, respectively, and their range of expertise facilitated interdisciplinarity  
9. and inclusivity to the conference proceedings, held in the University of  
10. Edinburgh, 28 April 2018. Panels were organized consecutively with no paral-  
11. lel panels that successfully combatted that worst of millennial horrors: the fear  
12. of missing out. It also changed the mode of conversation; all the conference  
13. delegates attended all-to-nearly-all of the papers given, encouraging dele-  
14. gates to maintain a sharp thematic focus and allowing for links to be drawn  
15. between multiple papers.

16. Dr Sorcha Ní Fhlainn's keynote speech 'Don't f\*ck with the original:  
17. Postmodernity, feedback loops and new horizons in horror cinema from Wes  
18. Craven to Blumhouse' managed to comprehensively anticipate and address  
19. the recurring themes of the conference day. Her paper concerned contem-  
20. porary horror intertextuality and explored the recycles, remakes and reboots  
21. that dominated the horror market in the 2000s. Dr Ní Fhlainn drew parallels  
22. between the low-budget movies of Blumhouse Productions and the cinema  
23. of Wes Craven, a director she described as well-cited by horror filmmakers  
24. but somewhat under-represented academically. The talk highlighted that the  
25. field's political dimension is again experiencing a moment of mainstream  
26. cultural awareness. Recycles and revisions perform an important role in popu-  
27. lar culture, re-examining issues of race, class, gender and violence for new

generations. Citing a piece published in *The Guardian* that morning (Freeland 2018), the question and answer session closed with the sentiment that all progress that we had assumed to have made as a society with regards to equality and social injustice needed to be now defended and reclaimed again. Micro-budget films such as *Get Out* (Peele, 2017) show that these assumptions were perhaps surface-level at best.

Intertextuality was a common theme throughout the day. In 'Horror across media' Barbara Chamberlin looked at the concept in the comic-book reboot, *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (Aguirre-Sacasa, 2014). Chamberlin's paper put the active and engaged reader to the forefront. Using Round's concept of the 'revenant reader' (2014: 96) she showed how comics readers become partial-authors as the meaning of the nonlinear, sometimes feverishly disjointed panels can only be realized in the imagination of the reader.

Alison Bainbridge's tightly focused paper on satirical advertising in *Welcome to the Nightvale* (2012–present) made apparent what is otherwise invisible and assimilated in contemporary podcasting, that is, an invasive stream of constant advertising. As one of the delegates commented, the podcast is supported through merchandising and Patreon, so it is free from the sponsorships that define so much of podcast culture. The fake advertisements within *Nightvale* defamiliarize and hyperbolize the messaging and reverse the process of Marxist alienation of labour by making the consumers the ones who are alienated.

The panel closed with a complimentary paper on changing patterns of consumption and fandom. Dr Heljakka presented toys as a story-telling medium in and of themselves; games in which the players are not limited to the intentions of the designer. In an age of Adults Staying Younger Longer, we see an expanding market for toys inspired by horror icons 'cutified' into plump, rounded character designs. She charted the course of horror design as commodity from Damien Hirst and Alexander McQueen to DIY designs on Etsy. If the toys are not available, fans will customize or create their own. She noted recurring themes of adult-object identification and increased representation of gender neutrality and fluidity in toy design. It was one of the day's surprises and I look forward to hearing more conclusions drawn from horror as a ludic medium.

This was followed by 'Contemporary approaches to horror cinema' where Roos Fopma's paper performed a phenomenological study of watching a horror film at home, alone and in the dark. Coping with fear in solitude undermines the solidarity and intersubjective reassurance previously noted as the collectivising experience of watching a horror film in the cinema (Hanich 2010: 248). She proposed that solo viewers of horror combat this by using social media during or after the film. Her analysis inspired a lively commentary about the potential applications and deviations of this kind of study.

In support of my own research interests in gender, sexuality and horror, I was eagerly anticipating the panel on 'Horror and gender'. Charlotte Gough's close analysis of Aronofsky's *Black Swan* (2010) and *Mother!* (2017) looked at fragmented female subjectivity. Gough described the female protagonists' slippage of perception and self-perception when there is a phantom of a supposedly attainable ideal of perfection. In tension with the characters' alienation from their own bodies, Aronofsky's films evoke a 'haptic visuality', and draw the spectator's attention back to their own tangible and close bodies. This paired well with Valeria Villegras Lindvall's timely analysis of *Book of Birdie* (Schuch, 2017) as a queer romance that rewrites ritual from

1. centring around shame to embrace. The use of menstrual blood in the film  
 2. was described as operating through radical subversion and incorporation. She  
 3. was conscientious here that neither this representation nor her analysis is  
 4. intended to be trans-exclusionary or essentialist. *Book of Birdie* was cited as an  
 5. example of opening-up systems of meaning-making, allowing for the more  
 6. beautiful than terrifying transformations and transcendences in horror. Both  
 7. papers were well-received and enthusiastically engaged with. As there seems  
 8. to be an abundance of interest and content, it would be good to see a confer-  
 9. ence in the future focusing specifically on gender, sexuality and contem-  
 10. porary horror with room for content on problematizing masculinity and  
 11. making masculine bodies visible in discussions of gendered representations  
 12. within the genre.

13. However, the strength of this conference was its diversity. 'Trauma and  
 14. representation', focused on fear, atrocity and trauma in visual art. Artist Simon  
 15. Crosbie shared his practice-based research on representations of trauma  
 16. caused by the systemic sexual abuse by members of the Catholic Church.  
 17. He analysed sites of Catholic Church sexual abuse that are represented in  
 18. popular media. These institutions are presented as menacing from oblique  
 19. camera angles, taking cues from the covers of Gothic novels and classical  
 20. Hollywood storytelling as a readily available vocabulary for fear within the  
 21. popular imagination. They also obfuscate the social conditions that allowed  
 22. the abuse to occur. Crosbie supplied image samples of his own art installa-  
 23. tions which provide a personal counter-narrative. The installations featured  
 24. suspended clothing; blue woollen jerseys like Catholic school uniforms with  
 25. long, stretched arms that linked like arches of a cloister, connecting the lived  
 26. experience to a time, a place and the presence of a not entirely visible but very  
 27. sizable community of people affected by the abuse.

28. The Works in Progress session was vibrant and diverse with Jeanne  
 29. Ferrier's paper on zombies and disease providing an interesting insight  
 30. into suburban fears as no longer representing strictly localized anxie-  
 31. ties but globalized ones of contagion. Matteo Valentini looked at violence  
 32. as an 'image act' from the performance art of Marina Abramovi to viral  
 33. videos of terrorism. Ralph Dorey presented an innovative application of  
 34. Patricia MacCormack's 'Ahuman' and Deleuze's 'becoming-animal' to horror  
 35. games. They described the queer horror game as opening up potentialities  
 36. for the fluidity of identity and kinship for on-screen characters and players  
 37. alike. From the perspective of my own research interests, Melissa Macero's  
 38. economic contextualization of contemporary American horror was the stand-  
 39. out paper on this panel. Macero presented on the changing face of class  
 40. warfare as the precariat within *The Purge* franchise (2013–present) attempts  
 41. to find economic stability at any cost and uses the carnival of the Purge as  
 42. another gig to exploit. She asked whether we should see political critique or  
 43. political affinity with Trump's America in the Trump hat poster for *The First  
 44. Purge* (McMurray, 2018) due for release this 4 July. The franchise, another  
 45. Blumhouse Production, ostensibly wants to be anti-capitalist but it can only  
 46. operate within a capitalist imagination, tilting the focus from the plight of  
 47. exploitation to the plight of unemployment and the destruction of individuals  
 48. to the destruction of their bodies.

49. Overall, this was an invigorating and necessary state-of-field symposium,  
 50. providing interesting new directions while attempting to comprehensively  
 51. analyse the current Zeitgeist as it unfolds. Much like any good horror debut,  
 52. there is expectation of a sequel.

## REFERENCES

- Aguirre-Sacasa, R. (2014), *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, New York: Archie Horror.
- Aronofsky, Darren (2010), *Black Swan*, USA: Cross Creek and Protozoa.
- (2017), *Mother!*, USA: Protozoa.
- Fink, J. and Cranor, J. (2012 – present), *Welcome to the Night Vale* [podcast], June 15, <http://www.welcometonightvale.com/>. Accessed 29 May 2018.
- Freeland, J. (2018), 'From Windrush to Toronto, we're fighting old hatreds over again', *The Guardian*, Saturday 28 April, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/apr/28/windrush-toronto-old-hatreds-racism-sexism>. Accessed 29 May 2018.
- Hanich, J. (2010), *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers: The Aesthetic Paradox of Pleasurable Fear*, New York and London: Routledge.
- McMurray, G. (2018), *The First Purge*, USA: Blumhouse.
- Peele, J. (2017), *Get Out*, USA: Blumhouse.
- Round, J. (2014), *Gothic in Comics and Graphic Novels: A Critical Approach*, Jefferson: McFarland.
- Schuch, Elizabeth E. (2017), *Book of Birdie*, UK: Melancholy Star.
- E-mail: m.casey29@nuigalway.ie

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5774-7223>

1.  
2.  
3.  
4.  
5.  
6.  
7.  
8.  
9.  
10.  
11.  
12.  
13.  
14.  
15.  
16.  
17.  
18.  
19.  
20.  
21.  
22.  
23.  
24.  
25.  
26.  
27.  
28.  
29.  
30.  
31.  
32.  
33.  
34.  
35.  
36.  
37.  
38.  
39.  
40.  
41.  
42.  
43.  
44.  
45.  
46.  
47.  
48.  
49.  
50.  
51.  
52.