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Labors of Fear: The Modern Horror Film Goes to Work, edited by Aviva Briefel and Jason Middleton. University of Texas Press, 2023, 241 pp.

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From the gory cover art of VHS tapes to the iconic imagery of chainsaws, horror films have long been misconstrued as mere vehicles for shock and sensation. However, *Labors of Fear: The Modern Horror Film Goes to Work* challenges the common misconception that these items are used because they're horror staples and instead offers a socioeconomic analysis of the genre that explores representations of work and leisure with scholarly rigour and depth. Briefel and Middleton build upon the foundational work of Robin Wood to present a fresh framework for understanding horror cinema, delving into overlooked aspects of the genre and challenging conventional interpretations concerning how horror films depict work.

Labors of Fear covers a wide range of complexities within the horror genre, from the tools of killing to the intersections of race and economic inequality as found in a range of modern horror films from the 1970s to the 2010s including *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974), *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* (André Øvredal, 2016), the films of George Romero, and several references to *Us* (Jordan Peele, 2019) and *Midsommar* (Ari Aster, 2019).

In this review, I will look at the socioeconomic ramifications of horror cinema and its broader cultural relevance, as reflected through the book's chapters, and illuminate the book's strengths and potential areas for improvement, while also analysing the importance of its contribution to the study of horror films and to future research in the field.

The book's first section, "How Horror Works: Killing, Dying, Surviving" consists of three chapters. Marc Olivier's "Tools of the Trade: A Statistical Analysis of Slasher Hardware", one of the book's most compelling chapters, challenges conventional perceptions of slasher film tropes by quantifying the frequency of popular weapons usage. His analysis reveals patterns and trends that defy common assumptions about slasher films. For example, Olivier highlights the rarity of chainsaw-related killings in horror films, contrary to popular belief perpetuated by iconic horror imagery. He observes that there are only nine out of 1,130 tracked kills in slasher films with chainsaws, a statistic that challenges the exaggerated perception of the chainsaw's prevalence in the genre. This empirical approach adds a new layer of depth to the study of horror cinema, grounding analyses in concrete data rather than mere conjecture. Moreover, Olivier's examination explores the class biases and gender imbalances depicted in iconic movies like *Texas Chainsaw*

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Massacre and *American Psycho* (Mary Harron, 2000), going beyond the realm of weaponry. He argues, "[s]lashing is a murderous craft typically performed by a white (96.0%), heterosexual (90.5%), male (84.2%) killer in clothing associated with the working class and using tools connected to working-class trades" (18).

By contextualising violence within broader social frameworks, Olivier sheds light on the intricate relationship between characters and objects in these films. He acknowledges the nuanced portrayal of LGBTQ+ characters in slasher films but falls short in providing clarity regarding the methodology used to label characters based on their sexual orientation. He admits that he "label[s] characters as bisexual, lesbian, or gay in the data only when dialogue and behavior explicitly move beyond coding (e.g., Jennifer in *Jennifer's Body* [Karyn Kusama, 2009])" (33). This underscores the need for transparency in research methodology, especially in sensitive areas such as LGBTQ+ representation in media. Detailing the assessment criteria could strengthen the validity of Olivier's conclusions and provide readers with a more thorough understanding of his examination in this crucial aspect of slasher films. Overall, Olivier's essay lays the groundwork for further analysis within the realm of horror film studies about weapon usage.

Analysing the "dying" aspect of the book's first section, "Every Ritual Has Its Purpose: Laboring Bodies in *The Autopsy of Jane Doe*", David Church posits that "sustained and substantial depictions of postmortem labor are more likely to appear in films that border on genres other than the horror genre proper—which prompts the question of why a genre so intensely focused on death would seem to push these critical roles toward its representational margins" (39). He contends that the film's strength lies in its portrayal of the cultural fascination with confronting death through ritualised practices, diverging from the mundane deaths faced by real-world postmortem workers. While horror films occasionally feature morgue or funeral home settings, Church notes a tendency to neglect the labour of death-care workers, often portraying them as monstrous antagonists or comedic caricatures, and highlights sidelined professionals. However, despite drawing parallels between *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* (André Øvredal, 2016) and possession subgenre films, the chapter overlooks its primary aim of shedding light on neglected death-care workers. Additionally, comparisons to films like *Short Night of Glass Dolls* (Aldo Lado, 1971) seem misplaced due to substantial differences in narrative structure, thematic focus, and cinematic style.

Considering the "survival" aspect of the section, Adam Lowenstein's essay "George A. Romero and the Work of Survival" delves into George Romero's *Survival of the Dead* (2009), particularly its exploration of zombies as a threatened species, often overlooked by audiences. Lowenstein starts by referencing Romero's renown for portraying societal collapse and survival scenarios, typically centred around a resilient band of survivors in a post-apocalyptic setting. He highlights the unique aspect of *Survival of the Dead*, introducing two Irish families with opposing views on zombies—one advocating extermination while the other suggests enslavement and training.

Drawing parallels between *Survival of the Dead* and William Wyler's western *The Big Country* (1958), Lowenstein contrasts Wyler's hopeful character reunions with Romero's portrayal of the entanglement of civilised and savage forces in a conflicted American landscape. Furthermore, Lowenstein delves into the themes of collective trauma, societal collapse, and the narrative exploration of zombies as a threatened species in Romero's novel, *The Living Dead*. In

conclusion, Lowenstein posits that Romero's zombie films provide an opportunity for audiences to contemplate the importance of resilience, survival, and the efforts necessary to achieve them. Lowenstein also suggests that "[f]rom *Night of the Living Dead* to *The Living Dead*, Romero has returned again and again to his zombies, not to repeat himself but to revise himself" (72). However, the perspective that Romero's films are revisions rather than remakes oversimplifies his artistic contributions. It fails to acknowledge the narrative work between his films and undermines his growth and evolution as both an artist and director despite securing his reputation early on in his career as the Godfather of the zombie film.

In the book's second section, several writers apply feminist theory to analyse how horror films portray the challenges of "women's work". Topics include marriage and motherhood, emotional labour in relationships, and reproductive tasks, highlighting the inherent fears in these gendered roles.

Evaluating the psychological distress associated with domestic labour, Lisa Coulthard's "Sonic Gothic: Listening to Gendered Domestic Labor in *The Babadook* and *The Swerve*" examines the portrayal of exhaustion and psychological distress among working mothers in recent horror films *The Babadook* (Jennifer Kent, 2014) and *The Swerve* (Dean Kapsalis, 2015), highlighting societal expectations and gendered domestic labour. Coulthard notably introduces the concept of sonic Gothic, "a mode of the genre that uses sound to highlight female dissociation and breakdown" (78). Though Coulthard's emphasis on sound is notable, the essay neglects to adequately consider visual cues, cinematography, and editing techniques in the films, which are crucial for portraying motherhood and feminine domesticity.

In the second chapter of the second section, titled "No Drama: Emotion Work in *Midsommar*", Jason Middleton defines "emotion work" in Ari Aster's film *Midsommar* (2018) as the "effort expended by the protagonist Dani throughout *Midsommar* to sustain and manage her relationship with her boyfriend, Christian" (95). The protagonist's realisation of emotional neglect and manipulation by her boyfriend's "toxic masculinity" leads to a toxic environment. While Middleton offers a nuanced interpretation of *Midsommar* centred on the protagonist's emotional recovery, the chapter oversimplifies the film. This oversimplification arises because the chapter focuses exclusively on the emotional progression of the protagonist, ultimately only addressing elements that support this perspective and ignoring everything else in the film outside this scope.

Closing out the book's second section is "Reproductive Technics and Time: Ectogestational Labor, Biotechnological Horror, Social Reproduction" by Alainna Thain, which delves into the intersection of reproductive technology and societal norms using the 2017 speculative design project *Partu-ri-ient* (2018) and the 1976 film *Embryo* (Patricio Valladares, 2020). Thain challenges conventional horror narratives about reproduction and labour, advocating for a more nuanced interpretation in which gestational work is viewed in conjunction with social, economic, and political structures. The chapter examines Victoria's struggles with ectogestation, analyses gender dynamics and power relations, discusses themes of queer kinship and nonhuman companionship, and critiques societal power dynamics as portrayed in the film. However, the essay relies heavily on speculation about character motivations and fails to adequately consider how race, sexuality, and other social factors shape the film's characters.

The book's last section, "Stolen Work, Stolen Play: Race and Racialized Labor", explores horror's role in revealing racial dynamics in American work and leisure.

The opening essay in this section, "'We Want to Take Our Time': The Hard Work of Leisure in Jordan Peele's Us" by co-editor Aviva Briefel, examines Jordan Peele's portrayal of Black leisure in *Us* (2019) and its intersection with horror, specifically addressing the theme of "stolen play" suggested by the section's title. Briefel discusses Gabe's insistence on visiting the Santa Cruz Boardwalk in Us, despite Adelaide's unease, as emblematic of the inherent anxiety and fear in Black American leisure. She argues that the climactic instances of excess and violence in *Us* resonate with the themes explored in the "women's films" of Douglas Sirk, such as *Imitation of Life* (1959), albeit from a perspective that addresses race, class, gender, and motherhood within the leisure environments of Black women. Additionally, the chapter explores the complex identity challenges faced by the protagonists, especially in the presence of the "Tethered"' connecting the narrative to broader critiques of capitalism and inequality. Briefel's use of Hochschild's concept of "emotion work" adds another layer to the analysis, emphasising the significance of unpaid emotional labor within the film's context. Despite its theoretical depth and complexity, the chapter remains compelling due to its thorough examination of American identity, spatial theories, and the influence of capitalism on both work and leisure.

The second essay in this section, "Racing Work and Working Race in Buppie Horror" by Mikal J. Gaines explores the subgenre of "buppie horror", a category of films about "upwardly mobile Black couples, interracial couples (that may include a Black partner), or a single Black woman (sometimes with children), who, like their earlier white counterparts, find themselves besieged by an Other figure who threatens to destroy the picture-perfect lives they have worked hard to create," (151–52) akin to "yuppie horror" films. Through analysis of films like *Lakeview Terrace* (Neil LaBute, 2008) and *Obsessed* (Steve Shill, 2009), Gaines suggests that buppie horror serves as a commentary on broader anxieties about Black upward mobility and challenges to the American dream. Towards the end, Gaines discusses how *Traffic* (Steven Soderbergh, 2000) aligns with the buppie genre and suggests that trading in bodies is depicted as the most horrific job possible. While acknowledging the genre's relevance as commentary on Black identity, the chapter could benefit from a more focused exploration by delving into specific aspects or themes evoked by the buppie horror rather than offering mere commentary on the subgenre's existence.

The third chapter in this section, "The Horror of Stagnation; or The Perspectival Dread of *It Follows*" by Joel Burges argues that *It Follows* (David Robert Mitchell, 2014) symbolises economic stagnation against a Detroit backdrop, reflecting global economic slowdown and class morbidity. While offering a fresh perspective on the film, the chapter suffers from ambiguity and a narrow focus on only select technical elements.

Closing out the book's third section, "Fieldwork: Anthropology and Intellectual Labor in Ari Aster's *Midsommar*" by Anjuli Fatima Raza Kolb examines *Midsommar* through Lévy-Bruhl's theory of primitive mentality, asserting that the film portrays cisgender, white, heterosexual men appropriating women's labour and seeking self-abolition in response to their failures. The author also argues that the film perpetuates racial and gender violence but fails to delve into broader implications or connect *Midsommar* to other films addressing similar themes. Consequently, the

chapter offers a limited perspective, limiting its analysis to *Midsommar* rather than considering how other films or works tackle these ideas.

While the book's examination of contemporary horror films is timely and important, it occasionally lacks depth in its exploration of specific films and concepts, leading to a need for more detailed analysis. Nevertheless, it is refreshing to encounter an analytical approach to recent horror films that breaks away from traditional interpretations and frameworks. "Labors of Fear" demonstrates ambition by effectively introducing innovative approaches, such as feminist, Black, and occupational perspectives, into the study of horror films.

Although Jason Middleton occasionally employs established film theory in his chapter, such instances are rare, emphasising the largely uncharted territory of these thematic areas in horror films, particularly contemporary ones. Any gaps in the analysis of "Labors of Fear" should not be seen as deficiencies but rather as opportunities for further investigation. Given the current era of escalating costs and the demand for enhanced working conditions, the book offers a solid foundation for examining horror films from an occupational perspective.

Labors of Fear stands out as a groundbreaking piece that reshapes the study of horror films by delving into their socioeconomic ramifications and depictions of work. Through an examination of the book's chapters, readers acquire valuable insights into the evolving landscape of the horror genre and its broader cultural relevance. Moreover, the book not only illuminates overlooked facets of horror films, but also confronts conventional interpretations, laying the groundwork for future research and scholarship in the field. As we strive to unravel the intricacies of horror cinema, *Labors of Fear* serves as a guiding light, leading us through the genre's obscure pathways and opening up new avenues for exploration and discovery.

While I think *Labors of Fear* is a notable entry in horror film studies, this valuation may appear contradictory considering I have noted in several places throughout the review that certain chapters are oversimplified or lack specificity. However, it's important to distinguish between the strengths and weaknesses of individual chapters as opposed to the overall value of *Labors of Fear*. Middleton might oversimplify or I might take issue with some phrasing found in Lowenstein, however, I praise each of the book's chapters for doing what has not been done in horror film literature to date and for adding to the sum value of *Labors of Fear* in hopefully evolving horror film studies.

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