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Lost in the Dark: A World History of Horror, by Brad Weismann. University Press of Mississippi, 2021, 264 pp.

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Since the 1970s, much of the film-going world has been accustomed to a "blockbuster" inaugurating the summer movie season. Most of these have been sci-fi, action, or high-fantasy spectacles. However, in the first post-lockdown summer, American moviegoers flocked to see a horror film: *A Quiet Place, Part II* (John Krasinski, 2021). The sequel to the pre-lockdown sleeper hit *A Quiet Place* (John Krasinski, 2018) topped June's box-office till it was surpassed by yet another horror sequel, *The Conjuring: The Devil Made Me Do It* (Michael Chavez, 2021).

The commercial success of these two horror films are surprising given the social, economic, and political malaise of the recent past. One would have imagined *A Quiet Place Part II* to be especially susceptible: the film depicts a post-apocalyptic environment where humanity's few survivors go to desperate and brutal lengths to stay alive. Yet, as Brad Weismann states in the first chapter of *Lost in the Dark: A World History of Film*, the subject of horror can serve as a catharsis to fear:

> Horror lives at the borders between life and death, in the cracks between human and inhuman. By crashing through the normal, horror redraws those boundaries. Many times the enormous reservoir of human fear is, at its base, a fear of transformation, and the inevitable changes that death, time, loss, and an uncaring universe can impose. Experiencing the vicarious thrills of horror can help us confront, rehearse, and, finally, transcend our fears. (3)

Divided into twenty-four chapters, *Lost in the Dark* documents the origin, evolution, and variations of the horror film around the world. The various chapters review popular franchises, significant auteurs, and regional trends. Weismann offers brief analyses on select figures and works, some obvious, such as Britain's Alfred Hitchcock, and some not (Brazil's Coffin Joe), but largely follows the canonical narrative when it comes to the who and what of horror cinema. Brevity and orthodoxy, rather than depth and challenge, form Weismann's approach.

Lost in the Dark opens with a retrospective on people's ancient fascination with paranormal tales. The Bible has stories of demonic possession, spectral omens, and resurrection. Pliny the Younger chronicled one man's ordeal in a haunted Greek manor. In Late Antiquity, a seminarian

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named Eftýchios wrote of his teacher's bargain with Satan to achieve power. Tales such as these inspired popular novels, plays, and, in time, motion pictures.

Even in its nascent state, the horror film played host to technical, commercial, and creative progressivity. The early short *Le Manoir du diable* (Georges Méliès, 1896) showcased stop-motion trickery. Alice Guy-Blaché and Victorin-Hippolyte Jasse directed the first screen adaptation of Victor Hugo's Hunchback tale with *Esmeralda* (1905). Three years later, horror entered the realm of animation with *Le Cauchemar de Fantoche* (Émile Cohl, 1908). Shortly after that, horror went "indie" with Paul Wegener's independently produced *The Student of Prague* (*Der Student von Prag*, Stellan Rye, 1913).

The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (*Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, Robert Wiene, 1919) is the first film Weiss explores from both a historical and critical perspective. Scholars have long celebrated *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* as not only a film adaptation of artistic expressionism, but as an archetype of cinematic art in itself. The film's aesthetic facets and narrative twist have been well documented, yet Weiss delves into the narratological implication behind the film and its antagonist:

> Many persistent traits of the horror film are already present. Science here is a form of magic, and in Caligari we have a mad scientist of operatic proportions. His suspect specialty is mesmerism. He's a despised and resentful outcast from official society, part con man and part conjurer. He weaponizes his unnatural powers for evil purposes; his somnambulist subject is by turns a serial killer, a zombie, a robot, a child. The creator/monster dynamic is in full bloom here. The creature acts out the impulses that the mastermind dictates. (13)

Weiss reminds the reader that studios of the silent and early sound eras treated the horror film with the same commercial value as a comedy or drama. Germany's Universum Film Aktiengesellschaft (UFA) and Universal Pictures Corporation in the US invested much capital in the production, distribution, and promotion of horror films, exemplified by *Faust* (F.W. Murnau, 1926) and *The Phantom of the Opera* (Rupert Julian, 1925), respectively. Moreover, many celebrated figures worked in front of or behind the camera, including Murnau, Conrad Veidt, and Lon Chaney, Sr.

Conversely, Weiss documents in Chapter Five how the horror film became an early example of over-commodification. Following a rise in national censorship in 1934 and its seizure by lenders in 1936, Universal—the foremost US studio in the genre—transformed its acclaimed and expensive horror properties of the early 1930s into low-budget franchises. Beginning with *Son of Frankenstein* (Rowland V. Lee, 1939), Universal's once-feared paranormal antagonists experienced a long devolution, ending up as comedy fare by the late 1940s.

As Weiss states: "[t]he keynote of all Universal horror films made after *Son of Frankenstein* was thrift", adding that "horror was demoted to B-movie status. Instead of being made as stunning A-list features, they were treated as predictable moneymakers, genre fare, suitable for auditoriums girdling the dependable audiences of kids, idle lovers, and pioneer horror aficionados" (42). This early form of devolution presaged the course of later horror film

antagonists, including the masked serial-killer Michael Myers, dream-hopping Freddy Krueger, and seemingly invulnerable Jason Voorhees. For Weiss, fear subsides as the monster becomes a common sight, subject to parody and mimicry.

Even within this period, however, meaningful horror emanated from some parts of Hollywood. Weiss devotes Chapter Six to the works of Val Lewton, the producer behind a string of low-budget horror films for RKO. His best-known production, *Cat People* (Jacques Tourneur, 1942), told the story about a woman whose surges of desire transform her into a murderous beast. Lewton's productions sacrificed pomp for subtle taboo. "Under Lewton", Weiss notes, "the horror film opens out and speaks about far more than it was initially designed to do. Lewton leverages the mind of the viewer to fill in the blanks, knowing of course that what is imagined might be behind that door or lurking above is far more terrifying than anything shown" (57).

The end of Lewton's run corresponds with the breakup of the US studio oligopoly. The decline of the old institutions presented an opening for independent producers. Hammer Studios in the UK (Chapter Eight) and American International Productions (Chapter Ten) filled that opening with colourful (technically and thematically) "schlock" horror. In the process, Hammer and Roger Corman fostered iconic talent, such as Peter Cushing, Christopher Lee, and Vincent Price.

Weiss devotes special focus to Corman and Price as a creative duo in Chapter Ten, which parallels the silent era dynamic between director Tod Browning and Lon Chaney. The author sees each pair as inextricably linked. Corman's productions with Price, like Browning's with Chaney, formed the foundation of their directorial careers. Chaney-Browning collaborations, such as *The Unknown* (1927) and *West of Zanzibar* (1928), undoubtedly gave Browning the creative capital with Universal to direct *Dracula* (1931) and *Freaks* (1932). Likewise, the Price-Corman adaptations of *House of Usher* (1961) and *The Pit and the Pendulum* (1962) gave the latter the financial weight to maintain creative independence. In turn, these very same productions gave their stars roles that would forever tie them—whether they wanted to or not—to the horror genre.

As is widely accepted, Weiss marks 1960 as a turning point for the horror film. He highlights four key pictures released that year: *Peeping Tom* (Michael Powell), *Jigoku* (*The Sinners of Hell*, Nobuo Nakagawa), *La maschera del demonio* (*The Mask of the Demon*, Mario Bava), and, most consequentially, Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*. The commercial success of *Psycho*, according to Weiss, paved the way for the abolition of the Hays Code and for the extreme liberties of later grittier directors.

This argument is plausible in itself; however, Weiss centers this transformative phase of horror cinema on his four Cs: Clark, Craven, Carpenter, and Cronenberg. These four directors, the subjects of Chapter Seventeen, are supposed to embody the horror dimension of "New Hollywood". The four Cs are a nice device, but did all four really transform the genre? It's true that Bob Clark directed a film that used Christmas as a setting for the genre with *Black Christmas* (1974), but does he rank as a genre auteur alongside Wes Craven and John Carpenter? His best-known works are comedies. Apart from *Black Christmas*, Clark never achieved prominence within the horror genre. That hardly aligns him with Wes Craven, whose films include *The Last House*

on the Left (1972), *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), and *Scream* (1996)—each a commercially and critically noted work in horror.

Weiss devotes the final third of his book to trends of modern genre, notably Asian horror, horror/comedy hybrids, and the evolutive zombie flick. While there's much to say about these strands of genre, Weiss's limited space relegates most titles and filmmakers to quick mentions. In the case of Asian horror (Chapter Nineteen), Weiss summarises whole markets in merely a few paragraphs. Many of these latter chapters amount to the author listing titles as if to check boxes. This is a shame given the growing commercial output of emergent markets. Some have even spawned lucrative franchises with strong regional followings, such as *Chattoe* (Banjong Pisanthanakun and Parkpoom Wongpoom, 2004) and *Munafik* (Syamsul Yusof, 2016), deserving more than a passing mention.

Moreover, Weiss reveals a narrow outlook on the creative merit behind Asia's most expansive markets. In the case of South Korea, Weiss defines only one genre auteur: Kim Jee-Wook, director of *Joyonghan Gajok* (*The Quiet Family*, 1998) and *Janghwa, Hongryeon* (*A Tale of Two Sisters*, 2003). Based on Kim's output, one would at least consider Na Hong-Jin as his stablemate with his notable thriller *Chugyeokja* (*The Chaser*, 2008) and the paranormal *Gokseong* (*The Wailing*, 2016).

Weiss does offer occasional areas of rewarding insight in these last chapters. Unlike the genre's primogenitors, the modern filmmaker has almost 130 years of cinematic precedence from which to derive and transform subjects. Weiss studies how the zombie, for instance, has gone from the voodoo-enabled drone of *White Zombie* (Victor Halperin, 1932) to the rage-driven beast of *Rec* (Jaume Balaguer and Paco Plaza, 2007). The subject of zombies has even gone from the coarse end of cinema to the premium edge of the spectrum, as evidenced by Danny Boyle's award-winning *28 Days Later* (2002) and Marc Forster's big-budget *World War Z* (2013).

Indeed, some monsters have proven to be excellent tragedians. *Let the Right One In* (*Låt den rätte komma in*, Tomas Alfredson, 2008), adapted from a 2004 novel, recasts the vampire from a suave, predatory male seen in *Dracula* to that of a little girl who contends with isolation and violent hunger. *The Shape of Water* (Guillermo del Toro, 2017) sees the aquatic antagonist of Universal's *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (Jack Arnold, 1954) turned into the sympathetic victim of humans' cruel experiments. Mainstream critics lauded the aforementioned films. *The Shape of Water* even received honours from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences, American Film Institute, and British Academy of Film & Television Arts. That's a big leap from its 1954 debut.

Given the broad scope of the subject and modest size of *Lost in the Dark*, one can understand the author having little room for critique and analysis on most of his subjects. Nevertheless, Weiss's brevity does not do justice to chronicling a "global" history of the horror film. The book is at its best when it focuses on an individual auteur, franchise, or studio; but these focused chapters are few and far between. Much is either glossed over or ignored for the sake of space.

Lost in the Dark is full of compromises. Sadly, a measure of depth is one of them. Sufficient for the introductory film enthusiast, Weiss's book falls short for the film scholar and horror connoisseur.

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Chattoe [*Shutter*]. Directed by Banjong Pisanthanakun and Parkpoom Wongpoom, GMM Grammy (Dist.), 2004.

Chugyeokja [*The Chaser*]. Directed by Na Hong-Jin, Showbox, 2008.

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Dracula. Directed by Tod Browning, Universal, 1931.

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