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## Review

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## REVIEW

# Review: *Horror Film: A Critical Introduction* by Murray Leeder

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This is a book review of *Horror Film: A Critical Introduction* by Murray Leeder, a comprehensive yet concise introductory guide to horror cinema.

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### ***Horror Film: A Critical Introduction* by Murray Leeder. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. 276 pp**

Murray Leeder's newest book is a condensed yet comprehensive overview of the horror film written as part of the Bloomsbury Film Genres Series. While Leeder claims the book acts as a "non-specialist reader," (1) it provides a well-developed reference guide for even the most experienced scholars and horror fans.

Leeder, a professor in Communication, Media and Film at the University of Calgary, Alberta, is known for his previous research in the genre, including an analysis of *Halloween* from Auteur Publishing (2013) and *The Modern Supernatural and the Beginnings of Cinema* (2017). While these texts offer a more specific analysis of horror subjects, this critical introduction easily demonstrates Leeder's breadth of knowledge and research in the field.

The first three chapters give an overview of horror film history with Chapter One: '1895–1938: Horror's Process of Genrification,' Chapter Two: '1939–1973: Horror and the Crisis of Rationality' and Chapter Three: '1974 to present: High and Low.' The next three chapters discuss critical approaches to horror, divided into the what ('What is Horror?'), why ('Mind and Body: The 'Why' of Horror?') and who ('Horror Audiences, Critics and Censors'). Finally, the third set of chapters considers the aesthetics and technologies of the horror film: 'Shocking and Spooky Sounds,'

'Colours of Fear,' and 'Digital Horrors.' This overview is strongly logical, beginning with an overview of horror film history, focusing then on the analysis surrounding horror and research in the field, and ending with its aesthetic construction.

The book is incredibly concise, with each chapter split into sections that elaborate in more specific detail. However, the continuity and cohesion of the material analysed, as well as Leeder's fluid writing style, keeps the chapters from feeling uneven. The first three horror film history chapters cover an incredibly broad scope (over 120 years) of horror cinema and its beginnings. Leeder manages to keep this history concise yet comprehensive by separating the history into logical periods. Chapter One discusses horror's 'genrification' and how it came to be established as a known cinema genre, beginning with a discussion of German Expressionism and Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), and ending with Universal's Hollywood monsters (*Dracula*, *Frankenstein*) in the Golden Age of the 1930s. Chapter Two discusses horror cinema during the Second World War (its rationale and production during a time of real-life horror) and ends with the success of *The Exorcist* in 1973: "a very conservative parable on the importance of faith in a fallen world told through the prism of the horror film." (58) Chapter Three covers horror cinema from 1974 to present day, beginning with the dawn of the slasher film and ending with newer trends in horror from Blumhouse Pictures and the Oscar-winning film, *Get Out* (2017).

The construction of the book and its engagement with horror in such an expansive way, across all areas of research, is ultimately how the book succeeds in its originality. More frequently, introductory books on horror cinema cover a logical timeline and then elaborate on more precise case studies (see *The Horror Film: An Introduction* by Rick Morland, 2006), or focus more specifically on horror cinema from a particular country and its industry (see *Contemporary British Horror Cinema: Industry, Genre and Society* by Johnny Walker, 2015). Leeder's book covers a historical timeline while also comprising its growing field of research and the way horror has changed artistically and technologically, never particularising to the point of digression.

Leeder specifies that the text offers a “broadly Anglo-American-centred treatment” (2) of the horror genre, with some discussion of German, British, Japanese, and Canadian horror cinema featured throughout. This discussion includes Britain’s Hammer Horror and its cycle of Dracula movies starring Christopher Lee, Canada’s *Black Christmas* as a predecessor to the slasher film, and the cycle of Japanese horror (‘J-horror’). Still, the book centres on the American side of horror cinema, which causes a scater focus on the sections that cover horror cinema in Europe and elsewhere. This focus is understandable, considering the wide span of cinema Leeder had to include in this slim volume, and the book meets the expectation of being ‘introductory’ and everything that entails.

While the introductory material negotiates mainly US horror cinema, Leeder does, however, make a point of including more specific (and sometimes more obscure) areas of academic research. For instance, in the chapter on horror audiences, Leeder analyses everything from youth audiences to different types of horror fandoms, including cult horror fans and queer audiences. These different research areas in horror can often be a dense and challenging landscape to navigate, but Leeder provides information on these simplistically and effectively without reducing their scope.

In navigating the crowded landscape of horror cinema and research within the genre, *Horror Film: A Critical Introduction* makes for an accessible reference guide to add to one’s bookshelf—a text to flip through and find a swift piece of information for a research paper, or to read from cover (or bit by bit) to cultivate a potential interest in horror cinema. The book is by no means dense and offers an incredibly readable guide without jargon and pretentious language. It also works well as potential research or a creative starting point, one that could lead to a new area of exploration for a seasoned horror scholar or filmmaker.

### **Competing Interests**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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