

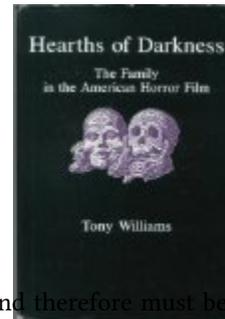
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Tony Williams. *Hearths of Darkness: The Family in the American Horror Film*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996. 320 pp. \$43.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8386-3564-3.

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Tony Williams's *Hearths of Darkness* follows the development of what he calls the American "family horror film" from the 1930s through the early 1990s. Professor Williams argues that the cinematic horror genre deliberately subverts the idealized position of the family unit in American ideology. The genre does so through subjecting representative families to brutal assaults by horrific and/or supernatural elements and, more often than not, demonstrating the beleaguered family possesses an equal capacity for violence and indeed is itself culpable in the cultural attitudes that perpetuate violence.

While other critics such as Robin Wood have also focused on the family horror film, Williams expands and updates the basic premise to include many of the significant, well-known American horror films of the past six decades, including the 1930s Universal and 1940s Val Lewton productions. However, the most valuable part of Williams's book is its refreshing survey of some of the regrettably under-scrutinized films in the genre, such as Larry Cohen's *It's Alive* series or Michael Mann's *Manhunter*. In this strategy, the book resembles Vera Dika's intriguing 1990 *Games of Terror: Halloween, Friday the 13th, and the Films of the Stalker Cycle*. Williams also draws from a refreshingly eclectic pool of sources, ranging from the works of Christian Metz to the pages of *Cinefantastique*. Generally, the book succeeds in its stated purpose: to illustrate one cinematic genre's narrative ambivalence toward family existence within material, capitalistic culture.

Williams begins by examining the 1930s Universal horror cycle, comprised of films such as *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, *The Wolf Man*, and the various resultant sequels. Williams asserts that the monstrous protagonists of these films are embodiments of "alternatives that [capitalist pa-

triarchal] society rejects" (p. 31) and therefore must be destroyed by the ideological order whose basic structuring unit—the family—is threatened by the invading Other. Thus, the films' seemingly irrelevant portrayals of mundane domesticity are central to the thematic agenda. Superficially, the monsters appear as external threats to the idyllic family, but actually "articulate deep tensions already within the family" (p. 32). Williams concludes that the Universal movies, existing within a wider 1930s American cultural discourse, parallel the era's isolationist retreat from the supposedly corrupting influence of foreign cultures. However, the movies (and the culture that produced them) perhaps unwittingly reveal the uneasy suspicion that one's own problems really originate much closer to home.

Williams then moves on to the classic RKO 1940s horror films, such as *The Cat People* and *I Walked with a Zombie*. He observes that World War II had done much to strip away "the isolationist innocence of America" (p. 51), which resulted in a firmer cinematic willingness to explore the darker side of the American character. The film noir genre, in which Williams locates the RKO Val Lewton films, is representative of the altered national mood. Lewton's horror movies shift the emphasis away from external, supernatural assaults upon the family and instead suggest that the family itself is a web of victims and victimizers perpetuating generational violence.

The stage has thus been set, Williams argues, for the 1950s horror cycle, which will directly indict the family unit as the origin of monstrosity. Alfred Hitchcock, of course, through the success of *Psycho*, is the most well-known director of family horror movies, but Williams singles out for analysis more neglected films, such as Walter Grauman's 1964 *Lady in a Cage*: a film that per-

haps even more than Hitchcock's work "presents family, urban society, religion, and capitalist decay as inter-connecting threads within an oppressive existence" (p. 90). At this point, Williams says, many Hollywood filmmakers, faced with the commercially unviable prospect of producing genuinely radical films that called for the abolishment of the authoritative family unit, returned to the safer practice of scapegoating an outside supernatural force or Other for the ills besetting American society. The result: the "Satanic assault" movies (e.g., *The Exorcist*, *The Omen*) of the 1970s.

However, this is not to say that American cinema refused to confront the pressing issues of the day, particularly the Vietnam War, but rather that the films did so obliquely, often through family horror themes. Williams, who has elsewhere worked extensively with cinematic depictions of the Vietnam War, points to movies such as George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* and Wes Craven's *The Hills Have Eyes* as allegorical treatments of American wartime ideology victimizing its own true believers. Williams locates such 1970s cinematic guerrilla radicalism primarily within low-budget, independent horror films freed of major studio limitations. The films of Larry Cohen, obviously one of Williams's favorite directors, receive lengthy treatment because their redemptive acceptance of the monstrous.

Williams concludes by noting the increasingly apocalyptic or millennial tone of later '70s, '80s, and '90s horror cinema. He sees this trend as indicative of a general cultural acknowledgment of the limitations of American missionary idealism. As Williams says, "With the decline of belief in myths and institutions, a religiously inspired (but secularized) sense of living in the 'last days' emerged, a mood modern horror best embodies" (p. 183). The material or social causes of violence are downplayed in more recent horror movies, while spectacularly gory or violent effects are fetishized. Any ideologies that are affirmed seem conservative, even brutally reactionary. For example, the 1980s *Halloween*, *Friday the 13th*, and *Nightmare on Elm Street* films attempt to reassert patriarchal power over transgressive youths, especially fe-

males. The late 1980s and '90s cinema of serial murder, represented by what Williams amusingly calls the "visually impoverished, thematically redundant text" (p. 255) of *The Silence of the Lambs*, typically champions law-enforcement patriarchies. Even so, Williams makes a strong case that no matter how superficially conservative, the family horror film does not seriously advocate a return to the self-destructive, patriarchal models of family existence.

For the most part, readers will enjoy the scope and fast pace of Williams's coverage. Some readers may argue that a few of Williams's statements about socio-economic or cultural trends, while intellectually provocative, are overly broad or unsubstantiated. As a matter of personal taste, the individual reader can also quibble about some of the works Williams chooses to exclude or include in support of his thesis. However, Williams's general strategy of concentrating on a mix of canonical and lesser-known films for commentary is a sound one.

Overall, the book surveys a diverse collection of horror movies and does so quite effectively. Williams critically engages many films that have been inexplicably neglected or dismissed by other scholars in the field. This alone makes the book a worthwhile companion to the broader focused horror studies by writers such as Noel Carroll, Barbara Creed, and Carol Clover. For those interested in the cinematic horror genre, Williams furnishes not only a fascinating thesis but some wonderful suggestions for further movie viewing. As American politicians incessantly urge a "return to traditional family values," Williams convincingly demonstrates that an unspoken but deep cultural ambivalence toward family existence often finds its most radical expression in the horror movie.

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