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Book Review
Contemporary British Horror Cinema: Industry, Genre and Society by Johnny Walker.

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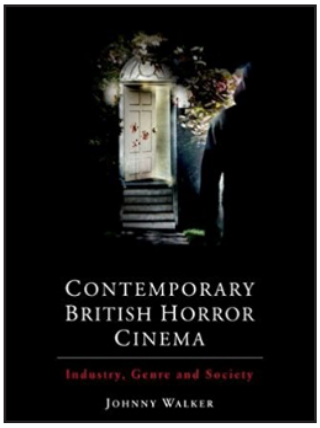

Walker, J. (2016) *Contemporary British Horror Cinema*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 176 pp. ISBN: 978-0-7486-8973-6.

Johnny Walker's *Contemporary British Horror* is an insightful and incisive study of a genre that has been historically plagued by 'the most vociferous of criticisms' (14). The term itself, 'British Horror Cinema', may conjure images of Christopher Lee's vampiric Count Dracula, Peter Cushing's stake-wielding Van Helsing, or any of the other gothic-inflected triumphs from Hammer Film Productions (famously branded as 'the studio that dripped blood'). For many years, Hammer 'would very much remain a catch-all terms for "British Horror Cinema" in the decades to follow' (5). But it would be the (so-called) video nasties campaign of the early 1980s that would have the most deleterious impact on the genre, effectively spelling the demise of horror in the British context for many years (save for a few gasps and whimpers). Indeed, the shadow cast by Hammer and the video nasties debacle has long shrouded, even cursed, the production of British horror cinema from the late-1980s and throughout the 1990s; and that shadow certainly looms large over Walker's book, too.

Contemporary British Horror charts and maps the post-millennial resurrection of the genre in the UK, a most 'curious and varied' instantiation, yet also 'prolific and distinctive' (12). As Walker explains,

> [t]he first decade of the new millennium saw British horror film production increase exponentially. Whereas only a smattering of horror titles were produced in Britain from 1990 to 2000, by the end of 2010 more than 400 had been released in one format or another (14).

In many ways, the genre was given a boost by its continued success in the US—most notably, those films of the Scream persuasion with their focus on teenage protagonists and youth cultures, such as *The Faculty* (Dir. Robert Rodriguez , 1998), *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (Dirs. Jim Gillespie and Kevin Williamson 1997), and so forth. At the same time, British horror certainly carved its own path while drawing and commenting upon a wellspring of generic inflections

across Anglo-American and historical contexts.

As the first study of its kind, Walker's book provides a route through the proliferating expanse of British horror in the 21st century. In so doing, the author aims to examine the social, cultural and economic forces that interweave and interplay with texts in order to construct a rounded portrait of the discursive regimes surrounding and penetrating the production of British horror texts during the period. Walker successfully, and deftly, teases out the multiple factors that govern the aesthetics of British horror. Such a multi-dimensional approach is not without its problems, of course. I am often reminded of Pierre Bourdieu's (probably implausible) insistence that the scholar needs to fully grapple with the complete and complex array of utterances, instantiations and discursive clusters if one is develop astute argumentation. That being said, and forgiving of blind spots (a point to which I shall return later), Walker structures the book in a logical and sensible fashion, beginning with the industrial context of British film production (Chapter 2) and moving onto case studies that highlight the bleeding over of socio-cultural and generic factors (Chapters 3–6).

The first two chapters set the stall for the case studies to follow with an overview of British horror production historically and industrially. Chapter 3, 'Nasty Resurrections', examines a quadrant of films that confront and address the video nasties 'panic' self-reflexively. Despite films such as *Creep* (Dir. Patrick Kack-Brice, 2014), *The Devil's Chair* (Dir. Adam Mason, 2007), *The Last Horror Show* (Dir. Julian Richards, 2003), and *Resurrecting the Street Walker* (Dir. Özgür Uyanık, 2009) being accused of basically pandering to contemporary US horror, Walker shows the way in which these films 'also recalled a stigmatic era that is specifically bound to British cultural memory' (41). It is almost as if British horror needs to attend to, and deal with, the scorched earth that continues to colonise our understandings of the phenomenon before it can move on. Here, Walker's approach is crystallised through an understanding of film culture as dialogic, 'not just hermetically intertextual, but also culturally and historically resonant because the [video nasties] films refers not just to a list of controversial videos, but an era of reception that helped define them as part of British culture' (41). In addition, the filmmakers evoked a nostalgia desire, 'a yearning for an ideal past' enshrined in the cult cinema of their youths (61).

The next chapter, 'In The Doghouse', turns to a spate of films that directly address a more contemporary discourse of the so-called 'New Lad', perhaps best emblemised by controversies anchored to publications, such as *Zoo* and *Nuts*. Again, Walker takes the bull by the horns and challenges commonly held assumptions of the New Lad horror film as a viper's nest of hyper-masculinity and misogyny. For example, *Lesbian Vampire Killers* (Dir. Philip Claydon, 2009) has been singled out as a container for reprehensible masculine politics, but Walker's counter-reading problematises knee-jerk interpretations as ill founded and parochial. *Lesbian Vampire Killers* is viewed not as a reactionary male fantasy, but 'to parody the assumptions generated by those stereotypes associated with the masculinity of cult and the cult of masculinity' (76). Not that Walker's reading should be seen as 'proving' a fixed and immutable perspective but, rather, as a keen demonstration of the fault-lines in the text, of polysemy as opposed to determinism. In reading between the lines, what gets Walker's goat is not the potential for various and often-contradictory interpretations, but the reactionary outbursts of popular journalism that leave no wiggle room.

In Chapter 5, Walker moves to the 'Hoodie horror', a cycle of films that seem to take David Cameron's publicised anxieties about the British underclass literally. In many ways emerging and running parallel with the demonisation of the working class as 'chavs', the media currency attributed to the neologism, 'hoodie', is instead built on fear rather than mockery (88). In films such as *Heartless* (Dir. Philip Ridley, 2009), the hoodie-as-signifier is cast in ways that signal towards the conservative discourse about 'broken Britain' but, unlike the previous chapters, it is difficult to ascertain whether Hoodie films provide their own brand of mockery as a return volley to Cameron's divisive serve. Instead, the Hoodie cycle is more amorphous and less obvious a critique. Granted, the films are thematically topical and engage with the highly publicised anxieties of the monstrous working class (or 'underclass' as the case may be), 'a unique, of-the-moment insight into how the British horror film allegorically assessed contemporary

society' (107). But in what ways the films actually assess the figure of the hoodie, as critique or straightforward agreement, is impossible to determine in this instance, and it would have been productive if Walker attempted the same level of analysis as he achieved so convincingly in earlier chapters.

In the final case study, Walker returns to Hammer, but this time to its 21st-century resurrection (as 'Hammer 2.0'). In this chapter, Walker analyses the way in which Hammer negotiated its heritage brand values in order to achieve relevance in the post-millennial context. Through multiple modes of address, then, Hammer could not simply reproduce the brand values of a bygone era as a bid for (re-) affirmation and consecration. Hammer might well be eternally attached to the horror genre, both nationally and internationally, but for contemporary audiences, the era may equally be viewed as one of kitsch and camp (an accusation levelled at Hammer during later years). To such an end, then, it is remarkable that the cultural capital afforded to Hammer in general terms, would require some adjustment to operate as a 21st century brand, even to the point that the studios' heritage needed to be buried in promotional discourses.

Walker's *British Horror Cinema* offers a strong intervention in current debates and discourses, and will be vital for scholars in Film Studies, Media and Cultural Studies and those interested in Cult cinema and media. The only reservation is that Walker often falls short when discussing audiences; he teases and skirts around audiences and fan cultures by proffering a series of imputations that prove the landscape of British horror—and perhaps horror more generally—is in need of a cohesive and sustained empirical investigation of what these types of films might mean to the millions of people who take pleasure in the brutal, the violent, and the dead. As the book does not claim to capture the affective dimension of audiences, Walker's main issue is one of contradiction and, as said above, imputation (as well as one egregious use of the largely debunked term, 'spectator'). How can horror cinema largely be the dominion of male fans while also having 'legions of female fans'? (18) Rather than a critique as such, Walker's book should stand as a springboard from which audience scholars can leap into the vast abyss of the unknown.

British horror may, in the words of Walker, have 'risen from the grave', but that certainly does not mean that the issues and factors raised have solved the aporia. The genre 'remained a central component a global cinema in the face of critical dismissal or academic voidance, and that British horror was at the forefront of new filmmaking technology, intertextual revelry and sophisticated social comment' (139).