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Professional Resource:

Horror and the Horror Film (2012)

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Horror and the Horror of Film. Bruce F. Kawin (2012). Anthem Press: New York, NY.

Whether you are an enthusiastic fan of horror films or you avoid the genre like the plague, there is no denying the importance and ubiquity of this unique form of cinematic storytelling. Horror movies, their literary predecessors, and their multimedia progeny are embedded in the fabric of our culture. Like Count Dracula or Freddy Krueger, their monsters have haunted our screens and agitated our dreams since the dawn of motion pictures, not only in the United States but throughout the world. Young people are especially drawn to horror's frightening and repugnant imagery, which is reason enough to make room in any media literacy program for a serious consideration of the genre's tenacious appeal; its long and influential history; the decisions behind individual productions; and the anxieties that they address.

Just when I thought I had read everything about horror films, when I believed everything possible has already been written on the subject, along comes Bruce Kawin's *Horror and the Horror Film*. As a film and literature teacher for many years, I have filled my shelves with scholarly works and popular treatments that promise insights into horror's evolution, theory, and aesthetics—topics to explore with my students. Kawin's book offers something more. It undertakes a "complete taxonomy" of horror in order to show us what it is, how it works, why it compels us, and why we need it in our lives.

The book begins on a brief personal note, with a preface that explains the author's early fascination with the genre, how horror films helped calm his childhood anxieties by offering complementary fears that he could identify as both emotionally real and artificially

constructed. This admission may well resonate with students who experience the visceral power of horror and seek a way to understand that power while clarifying the boundaries between psychological fact and cinematic fiction.

The opening chapter makes an eloquent connection between horror films and earlier forms of storytelling: "The circle of civilization surrounds the fire where stories are told, with the dark at its back—even if the fire has become a screen" (3). After a series of provocative, enlightening statements that help to define, contextualize, and explain the place of horror in our lives, Kawin introduces one of his most intriguing ideas in chapter 2, "The Monster at the Bedroom Window." He asks us to consider the many scenes in which monsters enter through a window, usually at night, just as our most frightening anxieties invade our dreams, just as the creepy imagery of horror movies attacks us through the movie screen. The relationships between windows, nightmares, and screens, between bedrooms, death, and sexuality are worked out with persuasive precision using examples from *Tarantula*, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, *Nosferatu*, *Häxan*, *Frankenstein*, and *King Kong*. In fact, probably the best feature of this chapter is the way Kawin uses the tools of cinematic text analysis to explore a promising idea. Students who follow Kawin's methods here can learn a lot about pursuing a hunch and developing a thesis. By the time we get to chapter 8, we understand the rich complexity of a concept like "fear in a frame:"

The screen can be a window—as the bedroom window can be a metaphor for the screen, the literal way the horror film finds its way into our consciousness—through which we look out at the world transfigured by art or presented without any mask, a window in which

horrors may show themselves, charging our dreams with the force of nightmare and our understanding with a frightening balance between what we know and what we fear to know. (207)

Kawin's broader program is both novel and ambitious. His "complete description of the horror film" divides the unruliest of genres into categories that may initially seem strange. There are sub-sections on monsters that include Transforming Monsters (*Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*), Constructed Monsters (as in *Frankenstein*), Composite Monsters (*The Fly*), Little People (*The Incredible Shrinking Man*), Animals (*The Birds*), and Body Parts (*The Beast with Five Fingers*). Other categories include Plants, Ghosts, Mummies, Shape-Shifters, Legends, and Humans. This attempt at a comprehensive taxonomy may strike some readers as overkill, but there are payoffs.

We learn, for example, to make clear distinctions between vampires and zombies, between witches and ghosts, psychopaths and sociopaths. We discover that the word "zombie" comes from *nzambi*, an African word meaning "the fetish or spirit of a dead person" (118). We read about the factual basis of this fear in a study of Haitian zombies that explains how poisons can invoke a death-like trance in victims with the assistance of cultural beliefs. In the section on witches, we are informed that most historical witches were really harmless pagan herbalists. In the chapter on shape-shifters, we learn that Hollywood added the silver bullet and the pentagram to the werewolf legend, but that tales about humans turning into animals date back to ancient times. In 1407, men and women were tried and tortured to death as werewolves during the Basel witchcraft trials, and in sixteenth century France, tens of thousands were charged with transforming into wolves at night. Kawin also tells us how to defend ourselves against particular monsters: "A bite from a zombie is inevitably fatal, and whoever dies becomes a zombie." Zombies "cannot be stopped unless they are burned or their brains are destroyed, and everybody knows to shoot a zombie in the head" (120). Such practical advice, however playfully offered, underscores an important point about watching horror films as well as a more general insight about survival. "The way to defeat the vampire is to believe that it exists and confront it on its own terms" (6).

Kawin wants us to understand the pact we make with horror films. Terror and repugnance, he notes, may be "an odd foundation on which to build an art," but there are good reasons why such things persist in

horror films (4). We come to the genre with certain expectations. "We want the films to shake us up, to show us wonders, to frighten us, to make us wince, to give us chills" (2). Horror films deliver these experiences, often with a vengeance, crossing the boundaries of human decency and good taste. In Kawin's view, these transgressions may spring from deep philosophical questions: "It is partly the horror film's job to tell us about our nature...which it continually defines and redefines in relation to other kinds and ways of being. It proposes a fable of who we are" (62). But horror movies also have a practical side, since the very act of facing the monster on the screen, feeling its power, and riding out the shock or revulsion to a cathartic ending can help to overcome an initial sense of helplessness. As Kawin puts it, "One of the primary functions of fear and horror in the genre [is] to enable one to survive them" (78).

If you are the kind of reader who shuns spoilers, be forewarned. Kawin uses frequent plot summaries to orient viewers unfamiliar with the films and to illustrate his ongoing analysis. These recapitulations can be meticulously detailed. Those who know the widely used *A Short History of the Movies*, currently in its 11th edition, expect a high degree of accuracy and completeness in Kawin's books. But there is a tendency in *Horror and the Horror Film* to summarize the whole story of many films, often in gruesome detail. If you prefer not to know who uses what to torture whom and that "none of them survive" (94), then this may not be the book for you. However, it is true that horror plots can be complex and confusing, so for those who want to check the names of characters, their relationships, and other facts, this book can be a valuable reference long after the first reading.

In another departure from the norm, Kawin rarely cites other scholars, historians, or theorists in his text. This may make it seem as if the author is going it alone, with little notice of the large body of work preceding his. For me, however, this is not necessarily a disadvantage. References to the critical literature appear mostly in endnotes, not as interruptions to the ongoing narrative. It is quite clear that Kawin has done his homework and knows what he is writing about. Even when he covers well-trodden ground, he has a way of making the territory seem fresh. We may have entertained the equation of nightmare-equals-movie before, but Kawin brings this analogy to life, like an academic Dr. Frankenstein. He shows how the idea

plays out on the screen and in our consciousness, tracing its progress through examples that affirm and clarify our experience. We are likely to follow him precisely because we have been to a haunted place like this before, have seen the monster breaking through our window, but never quite understood what that meant or why it made our pulse run high.