


8-29-2016

The Canadian Horror Film: Terror of the Soul edited by Gina Freitag and Andre Loiselle

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Recommended Citation / Citation recommandée

Schell, Jennifer. "The Canadian Horror Film: Terror of the Soul edited by Gina Freitag and Andre Loiselle." *The Goose*, vol. 15 , no. 1 , article 22, 2016,

<https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol15/iss1/22>.

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Of Wendigos and Werewolves: Notes from a Foray into Canadian Horror Cinema

***The Canadian Horror Film: Terror of the Soul* edited by GINA FREITAG and ANDRÉ LOISELLE**

University of Toronto Press, 2015 \$29.95

Reviewed by **JENNIFER SCHELL**

Gina Freitag and André Loïselles's *The Canadian Horror Film: Terror of the Soul* offers readers thirteen cogent and compelling essays, each of which explores a different facet of Canadian horror cinema. To organize the collection, these essays are grouped into six sections. The first outlines some of the specific characteristics of the genre, highlighting those features that make it specifically Canadian, while the second examines cinematic interpretations of the writings of such famous Canadian authors as Northrup Frye, Margaret Atwood, and Patrick Senécal. Adopting a more historical purview, the third section scrutinizes those horror films produced during the so-called "tax-shelter" period of Canadian protectionism. The fourth and fifth sections extrapolate upon some of the generic concerns raised earlier in the collection, insofar as the former addresses the sub-genre of eco-horror and the latter identifies the horrific aspects of animated and avant-garde films. And the final section consists of a case study of director David Cronenberg's film corpus.

As Freitag and Loïselles explain in their introduction, "this anthology offers a theory of the Canadian horror film that locates the 'terror of the soul' in the interval between external threat and internal dread" (4). Simply put, it demonstrates that "the Canadian horror film . . . produces a discourse of paradoxes

where familiar places lose their proper names, monsters behave like self-righteous victims, and heroes prove to be perverts" (4). As many of the individual authors astutely indicate in their essays, this "discourse of paradoxes" serves to highlight Canadian cultural anxieties about national character, American imperialism, gendered identities, environmental issues, and health care, among other things.

As a whole, this collection certainly accomplishes its goal of demonstrating that beneath the prosaic surface of Canadian culture lie horrors beyond compare. The individual essays consider a wide range of Canadian horror cinema—including suburban serial killer, rape-revenge, eco-horror, forest slasher, and mad scientist films. Although there is no index, the introduction provides a succinct overview of the contents of the collection, and the individual essays constantly refer to and build upon one another. In addition to making the book more user-friendly, this intertextuality helps to present readers with a coherent vision of the generic characteristics of Canadian horror films. Admittedly, the pieces on animated and avant-garde cinema seem a bit out of place in this context, but they indicate that the cultural anxieties manifesting themselves in Canadian horror films also manifest themselves in other types of cinema. As such, they deserve their place in this collection.

Significantly, at least five of the thirteen essays in *The Canadian Horror Film* grapple with Frye's and Atwood's articulations of Canadian identity—the garrison thesis and the survival theme, respectively. The list includes Andrea Subissati's "Viral Culture: Canadian Cultural Protectionism and *Pontypool*," Aalya Ahmad's "Blood in the Bush Garden:

Indigenization, Gender, and Unsettling Horror,” Gina Freitag’s “The [Hostile] Nature of Things: A Dialogue on Environmental Survival and the Canadian Eco-Horror Film,” Peter Thompson’s “Eco-Horror and Boundary Transgressions in *Orca: The Killer Whale*,” and Scott Birdwise’s “Where is Fear? Space, Place, and the Sense of Horror in the Canadian Horror Film.” All this is to say that those scholars looking to jettison Canadian cultural studies from the influence of two of its most venerable and oft-cited theorists will likely be disappointed with this collection. Those seeking new interpretations and applications of Frye’s and Atwood’s ideas will find much to admire, however. Of all these pieces, Ahmad’s postcolonial reading of the complex intersections of racialized and gendered Canadian identities in *Ginger Snaps Back* and *Clearcut* is particularly astute.

Many of the essays in *The Canadian Horror Film* are also preoccupied with gender identity and/or environmental issues. Over the past several decades, feminist scholars, such as Carol Clover and Linda Williams, have found horror films to be a fruitful subject of analysis. For some reason, though, just one of the essays—Sean Moreland’s “Contagious Characters: Cronenberg’s *Rabid*, Demarbre’s *Smash Cut*, and the Reframing of Porn-Fame”—in this anthology specifically addresses feminist concerns. In contrast, at least four pieces focus on the various ways in which Canadian horror films represent masculine identity or perversions thereof. Thus, in “Pure Laine Evil: The Horrifying Normality of Quebec’s Ordinary Hell in the Film Adaptations of Patrick Sénechal’s ‘Romans d’épouvante,’” André Loiselle describes the “paralysing dread of the common man as

monster” (85). Meanwhile, in “(Who’s in the) Driver’s Seat: The Canadian Brute Unleashed in *Death Weekend*,” Paul Corupe discusses Robert Fothergill’s masculine archetypes in light of one of the tax-shelter era’s most famous rape-revenge films. And in “Rituals: Creating the Forest Slasher within the Canadian Tax Shelter Era,” Mark R. Hasan describes the various types of men—the inept urbanite, the “mad mountain man,” and “the lone survivor”—that populate forest slasher films (121, 124).

If *The Canadian Horror Film* addresses gender issues, then it also focuses on environmental concerns. Freitag’s and Thompson’s essays on eco-horror represent the most obvious examples. The former argues that Canadian revenge-of-nature films “reflect distinct fears of the depletion of natural resources, the reaction of nature, and the effects of climate change, among other issues” (136), and the latter contends that *Orca* “speaks to complex cultural, economic, and political apprehensions that were coursing through Newfoundland and the rest of Canada in the late 1970s” (153). Of note, the list of environmentally oriented essays also includes those written by Caelum Vatnsdal, Ahmad, Loiselle, Corupe, Hasan, and Birdwise. What gives some these pieces an ecocritical bent is their focus on the horrors inherent in certain environments, suburban Quebec and rural Ontario, among others. For others, it is their concern with the contrast between “wilderness” or “wildness” and “civilization.” For still others, it is their examination of monstrous plants and animals. Taken together, these essays explore the range of ecological issues—climate change, epidemic disease, extinction, and deforestation—and monstrous creatures—ravens, rats,

werewolves, and wendigos—terrorizing the Canadian imagination.

As the collection draws to a close, Freitag and Loiselles pause to reflect upon its implications. Among other things, they conclude:

One of the most important elements which is interlaced throughout Canadian horror cinema is the idea of an ‘unsettled’ nation, one which is bothered, made ‘uneasy’ by the wildness of its landscapes, the continual uprooting and refining of identity, and one which is constantly disrupted by such specific anxieties which are never fully quelled. (273)

In sum, this statement explains, what makes Canadian horror film an important genre to examine and this book an important contribution to Canadian film studies.

JENNIFER SCHELL is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Her specialties include North American literature, Arctic writing, print and visual culture, animal studies, and environmental humanities. Her book *“A Bold and Hardy Race of Men”: The Lives and Literature of American Whalemen* was published in 2013 by the University of Massachusetts Press. She is currently working on a series of articles on the ecoGothic and a book manuscript on Alaskan/Arctic extinction narratives.