

David Roche, *Making and remaking Horror in the 1970s and 2000s*, The University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, 2014, 335 p. ISBN 978-1496802545*

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This book examines the contemporary remakes of some famous independent horror films from the seventies. The author offers a well-researched study, illustrated with a great number of black and white photograms, which says much the production context of these films and their ideological and aesthetic choices. The corpus consists of four critically acclaimed films which epitomize the American horror genre: *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974), *The Hills have Eyes* (Wes Craven, 1977), *Dawn of the Dead* (Georges Romero, 1978), and *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978). These works are compared with their contemporary remakes, some of them directed by cult filmmakers like Rob Zombie (*Halloween*). The starting point is an apparently simple question: why are the remakes less “disturbing” than the originals? David Roche strives to define this notion which concerns the emotional efficacy of the films as well as their subversive character and the work they operate on generic conventions.

At different stages in his study, David Roche refers to Laurent Jullier’s criteria for defining what makes a “good film”: commercial success, technical quality, emotional strength, originality and coherence between contents and form. It is precisely because they offered a political sub-text that the horror films made in the seventies were canonized by film critics like Robin Wood, Tony Williams or Christopher Sharrett. Roche claims to follow a subjective and emotional approach, but also seeks to combine various criteria and methods of analysis in order to objectify his discourse. He does not question the aesthetic and political superiority of these films. However, his work also aims at emphasizing the intrinsic qualities of the remakes beyond the mere cultural phenomenon they represent.

David Roche’s book is well structured, divided into eight, densely written chapters, packed with theoretical references and solidly arguments. The titles give a good idea of the contents and suggest a progression in the demonstration. Roche tackles these various issues very aptly, by offering a comparative analysis of the original films and their remakes, illustrated by numerous micro-readings of some sequences or single shots, which testify to a full command of film analysis.

The first chapter, “Text, subtext and context” sets up contextual and theoretical foundations while also introducing the main thesis. It shows that the major issues in the original films of the seventies and their remakes are, respectively, economics and war. The remakes tend to tone down the economic and social issues, at times even contradicting the discourse of the original film (as in *Dawn of the Dead*, 2004), while emphasizing the war context and especially the terrorist threat (in a post 9/11 context). This chapter also deals with the essentialist issue: practical and discursive norms that determine identity (social, racial, sexual) and which may be either reinforced or subverted. Chapter 2, “(Dis)connecting

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Race, Ethnicity and Class”, stresses the magnitude of the social issue, but also the importance of the racial one. Both are dealt with implicitly and metaphorically (by means of the monster motif) in the original films, and much more explicitly in the remakes. Chapter 3, “The (Dys)functional American Nuclear Family” demonstrates, following Robin Wood’s and Tony Williams’s works, that the family, especially in its dysfunctional aspects, is a structuring element in the films, both in terms of narrative and spatial organization. This topic is also essential in the remakes in which the monstrous family is a threat for the normal family. One central idea is that order does lead to disorder, contrary to Robin Wood’s thesis which stresses the repression of disorder by the forces of order. Chapter 4, “Gender and Sexual Troubles”, relies on the theoretical framework established by Feminist critics like Barbara Creed, Judith Halberstam and Carol Clover. It aims at demonstrating that the remakes tend to safeguard the values that the originals sought to question, especially as to the representation of masculinity. The analysis of the “final girl” motif (Carol Clover) underlines incoherencies in the discourse of some remakes (for example in *Hills*, 2006).

Chapter 5, “Resituating and Replaying the Genre”, develops three aspects: generic hybridity and the relationship with the gothic, the remake as an intertextual mode, and the comparative use of filmic references in the original films and their remakes. This implies assessing the modernity of each film and the relative relevance of their intertextual references. Again, the originals prove superior to the remakes that tend to be less innovative, taking up stereotypical models, such as gothic props. Chapter 6, “Monsters and Masks” opens on a historical and theoretical overview of the notions of terror, horror and anxiety. Roche proposes a redefinition of these terms through the prism of a dialectics of the presence or absence of the “monstrous stimulus” which determines the spectator’s emotional involvement. The author also claims, contrary to Noël Carroll’s assumptions, that emotions are triggered, not so much by the monsters themselves, but rather by means of articulating their modes of representation and the filmic strategies that are used. Chapter 7, “Strategies and Styles”, focuses on the formal *mise en scène* of the films, specifically on the strategies aiming at conjuring up fear, anxiety, horror or terror: framing and editing (on screen/off screen, shot/reverse-shot, frame within the frame etc.), slowing down the tempo and emphasizing contemplation as a source of fascination. The remakes, which advocate “intensified continuity” tend to overuse close-ups and their frantic editing rhythms lead to a limitation of the expressive range. Finally, chapter 8, “Constraints and Verisimilitude” offers a synthetic approach that appraises the respective merits of the original films and their remakes. Roche concludes that the seventies films integrate a political, anti-essentialist subtext, also offering a more modern, more diversified and formally innovative approach of the genre, its motifs and figures, foregrounding a type of “disturbing horror”. Conversely, the remakes propose a more heterogeneous, even contradictory political discourse and a homogeneous yet conventional filmic style. Roche concludes this chapter by specifying the reasons for the success of these small budget independent films whose strength and impact rely on a semi-documentary aesthetic approach. According to the author, this book aims at highlighting the normative practice of the Hollywood remake, asserting the idea that contemporary independent movies, may, following the example of the horror, take advantage of the limitations inherent to a small budget, as testifies the example of *The Blair Witch Project* (1999).

This well-written book (the prose is precise, concise and elegant) covers new ground

and associates various critical approaches, conflating varied analytical criteria (economic, political, feminist, generic and formal). It pays tribute and feeds upon the work of many historians and theoreticians of the horror genre (Robin Wood, Tony Williams, Christopher Sharrett, Carol Clover, Barbara Creed, Judith Halberstam, Jean-Baptiste Thoret, among others), of film theory at large (Bordwell, Hutcheon, Leitch etc.) and it also borrows from various philosophical works (Deleuze, Foucault, Lacan). However, the author does not hesitate to criticize – on specific points – some canonical works (such as those of Robin Wood or Noël Carroll). David Roche offers new theoretical approaches and many enlightening close readings of films, at time also pointing at the formal weaknesses of some remakes. Roche proves his true mastery of rhetoric, even of dialectics, which enables him to highlight paradoxes, contradictions and ambivalences in the discourse of some of the films he scrutinizes. Roche cares about visual and sound details and pays attention to the subtleties of shot composition, image and sound editing, light effects, without neglecting the part played by special effects and musical scores. He shows perfectly the links between the representation of the monstrous body (a common point of the films) and the filmic strategies which trigger fear.

One great quality of this book is the way in which the political dimension of the films is constantly articulated with their aesthetics. The author thus manages not only to provide new readings of the cult films from the seventies, he also reappraises the remakes while highlighting their commercial motivations which weaken their subversive dimension, when compared with the originals seen as more politically daring and also more formally inventive. We may just express a slight regret as David Roche discards the concept of the *fantastique*, only highlighting the notions of horror, and terror.

This ambitious and groundbreaking book shows a perfect knowledge of the films under scrutiny, and beyond, of Hollywood cinema and American popular culture. It also testifies to a full mastery of theoretical concepts and analytical methods. This very enlightening study is also an exciting read which provides a mass of information on the films, their contexts and subtexts. It will constitute a major contribution to research in the history and aesthetics of horror cinema.