



Digging Up a Decade: Unearthing the Relevance of 1940s Horror

Mario DeGiglio-Bellemare, Charlie Ellbé, and Kristopher Woofter, eds. *Recovering 1940s Horror Cinema: Traces of A Lost Decade*. Lanham: Lexington, 2015. 378 pages.

Book review by Justin H. Langlois

Many regard the significant years of the horror genre in the United States to be in the 1930s, with the rise of the Universal movie monsters. Movies such as Browning's *Dracula* (1931) and Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931) exemplify the Universal canon. By 1968, a more visceral and violent take on the genre was unearthed. Films such as Romero's *Night of The Living Dead* (1968) and *Last House on The Left* (1972) by Craven scared audiences in new and traumatic ways. Both periods have been widely acknowledged as quintessential for the horror genre, helping it carve out a place in academia and film history. However, many scholars regard the 1940s as a dead zone for horror. This low point in the genre produced a multitude of sequels that rehashed old frights and monsters, and clung to the popularity of the previous decade.¹

In a new collection of essays, *Recovering 1940s Horror Cinema*, Mario DeGiglio-Bellemare, Charlie Ellbé and Kristopher Woofter draw together a group of scholars who answer Mark Jancovich's call that 1940s horror has been wrongfully overlooked in academia. Much of Jancovich's work prior to this volume, such as "Two Ways of Looking': Critical Reception of 1940s Horror" (2010) and "Pale Shadows: Narrative Hierarchies in Historiography of 1940s Horror" (2008), shed light on the critical reception of 1940s horror.² Jancovich reveals that many of the films from this era had been previously dismissed, calling for more scholarly reflection on these forgotten works. DeGiglio-Bellemare, Ellbé and Woofter, all well versed in horror scholarship, have collected a series of articles that re-establish the primacy of 1940s horror. The collection

¹ Mark Jancovich, "Two Ways of Looking': The Critical reception of 1940s Horror." *Cinema Journal* 49.3 (Spring 2010): 45-66.

² Mark Jancovich, "Pale Shadows: Narrative Hierarchies in the Historiography of 1940s Horror," in *The Shifting Definitions of Genre: Essays on Labeling Films, Television Shows and Media*. Eds. Lincoln Geraghty and Mark Jancovich (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008): 15-32.

includes many different theoretical approaches, which help reveal the undeniable influence this decade had on the genre. By not limiting the essays to the United States or a specific theoretical approach, the editors cast a tremendously large net to reel in and capture an amorphous moment in this genre's history.

Though academics have typically regarded the horror genre as diluted and 'in crisis' during the 1940s, DeGiglio-Bellemare, Ellbé, and Woofter argue throughout this collection that genres such as film noir and the woman's film helped to construct the decade's long lasting and unique impact on the genre. The editors also reflect on genre formation and periodization, clearly designating how this collection elaborates on the work of other academics such as Mark Jancovich, Rick Worland, Richard J. Hand, and Paul Meehan. The book is divided into four parts—"Interventions," "Hybridity," "History" and "Poverty Row"—to reflect on a multitude of political and industrial climates that influenced horror in this decade. Standout contributions from Kier-La Janisse, Jancovich, Louise Fenton, and Gary D. Rhodes all work to reshape and reclaim this lost decade.

The first section of the collection, "Interventions," hits the ground running with a chapter by Woofter, who comments on gothic realism within this era and reclaims the importance it played. He notes that scholars overlook the fact that the 1940s witnessed a proliferation of sub-genres, such as film noir, mystery and woman's films, and the films from this era were infused with gothic and cinematic realism. By breaking down the ways in which scholars approach gothic horror and the 'thriller,' Woofter reveals that definitions tend to limit the ways in which the era expressed the social, political and cultural trauma that came with the advent of the Second World War. The subsequent two chapters address femininity and the proto-slasher genre, and how one may position their presence and longstanding influence on the horror genre. DeGiglio-Bellemare explores iconic horror writer and producer Val Lewton and his film *The Body Snatcher* (1945). He reflects upon the film's masterful use of the Grand Guignol tradition, while playing off the trauma of the Second World War.

“Interventions” is the most direct and compelling section of the book, reclaiming the decade and shedding light on its potency and longstanding influence. This section recuperates this nebulous moment in the genre’s history through an analysis of how academics perceive the genre, and how recent important approaches to horror are applicable not only to the canonical eras of the genre but also the 1940s.

The next section of the book is tremendously convoluted due to the expansive range of the topics that reflect on many different factors at play during this lost decade.

“Hybridity” reflects on what is often missed and overlooked by academics. The section jumps from a reflection upon children’s serials, to Edgar Allan Poe films of the era, and finally to Humphrey Bogart’s performances of the 1940s. The staggering scope of these topics leaves the section seemingly without focus. The chapters that stand out here are the contributions by Janisse and Ellbé. Janisse’s article “The Child Witness: Peril and Empowerment in 1940s Horror *From The East Side Kids to The Window*” is a meticulous reflection on kids’ serials and the role that horror played within them. These serials and their use of slapstick comedy and horror have been largely dismissed by scholars but would, she argues, “inspire generations of Monster Kids to come” (110). Their longstanding influence has been demonstrated in serialized cartoons such as *Scooby Doo* (1969) and films like *The Monster Squad* (1987). Ellbé’s reflection on the *Inner Sanctum* film series (1943-1945) similarly unearths Universal’s adaptations of radio thrillers. Ellbé conveys the unique positioning of these films in history and why their place is so relevant to the genre. Ellbé notes how these films stand out in style and form, and how they demonstrate a slow shift to psychological horror. This style was appropriated from its radio predecessors and would further develop in the cinematic form in later decades. These are just two of the section’s standout chapters that shed light on lost histories that academics mostly ignore. “Hybridity” also offers an analysis of how the horror genre, especially in the early days of cinema, has incorporated the cultural influences of other media, shaping the genre’s development.

The next two sections, though pertinent and revealing, do not wield the same agency or potency as their predecessors. The “History” section of *Recovering 1940s Horror*

Cinema focuses on the historical context of these films' production and distribution, and reflects upon the traumas experienced on a global scale during this decade due to the Second World War. The final section of this grandiose collection focuses more specifically on 'Poverty Row' films. These low-budget films, which were produced by independent American companies such as Monogram and Republic, were typically overshadowed by major Hollywood studio releases. As such, scholars commonly regard 'Poverty Row' productions as a subpar attempt at horror. In this case, however, the authors reclaim their place in history by revealing their worth. This section notably includes these productions and their auteurs as valuable additions to the horror canon despite their humble budgets.

In their introduction "Fragments of the Monster: Recovering a Lost Decade," DeGiglio-Bellemare and Woofter attempt to ground the book with a reflection on the 1944 Lew Landers film *The Return of the Vampire*. They use the film as a springboard into issues of historical context, re-appropriation, and influence on the genre from other media forms. A problem with this transition is that the scope of the introduction, and thereby the collection, is so large that it at times becomes unfocused. The editors do manage to save their collection from obscurity, though, by framing it as a reclamation of 1940s horror, thereby answering Jancovich's challenge to reconsider films from this decade. The majority of the chapters within this book therefore feel like an excavation, where the writers dig deep into the annals of film and uncover lost treasures, covered in grit, previously lost to the world.

The essays in *Recovering 1940s Horror Cinema* champion a lost decade of genre filmmaking, weaving between different geopolitical and economic contexts to reveal psychological trauma, generic intertextuality, and an irrationality of films, all produced in a decade supposedly plagued by sequels and lacking originality. Noël Carroll's *The Philosophy of Horror*³ notes the vehement place nostalgia has within the horror genre. Horror is said to be carnivorous due to how frequently films within the genre revise and

³ Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

revamp the themes and stories of its predecessors.⁴ It is for this reason that the recuperation of the 1940s is so important. *Recovering 1940s Horror* digs up the skeletal structure of these films, marking its long lineage while looking forward and tracing its influence on the more violent and visceral horror of the late 1960s that was, similarly, a product of war and period anxieties.

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⁴ Ibid.

Works Cited

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