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FILM-PHILOSOPHY

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Matt Hills (2005) *The Pleasures Of Horror*  
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In his book *The Pleasures of Horror*, Matt Hills attempts to assess the ways and means by which pleasure is gained by audiences from horror texts. By looking at previous approaches to the study of the genre as well as more recent work, Hills works through significant areas of academic study as well as more varied contexts of the reception of horror texts.

Hills largely takes a post-theorist stance in his work here, offering criticisms of academic practices that use a top-down, pre-existing theory based approach to understanding the pleasures gained from horror texts, and favouring more empirically researched, bottom-up approaches to the field. The book consists of four parts: the first dealing with theory based approaches; the latter looking at other possible areas of explanation.

Part One deals with theory based approaches of defining the pleasures of horror, particularly those based on cognitive psychological and psychoanalytical approaches. Chapter One (*Philosophies of Horror: Cognition ... and Affect*) details several such cognitivist approaches to theories of affect on audiences, specifically in relation to the field of horror, but it is largely Noel Carroll's work on the subject in *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart* (1990, Routledge) that comes under scrutiny here as representative of 'affective' approaches to studying the genre as a whole. Chapter Two deals with more structuralist based theories of cognition in connection to understanding audience responses to horror texts, predominantly those based on Tzvetan Todorov's work, specifically that connected with ideas of 'the fantastic'. Chapter Three follows with a discussion of psychoanalytical (largely Freudian based) approaches to readings of

horror texts such as those based on theories of repression, the uncanny, the abject and the compulsion of repetition.

Part One then outlines significant theory based approaches that have been proposed as starting points for understanding how horror texts work to produce an affect on an audience, but also highlights the possible limitations of these approaches. By working through the problematic areas and juxtaposing conflicting arguments of academic study within these areas, Hills serves to undermine these theoretical approaches by pointing out their flaws, specifically in terms of their inability to be universally applicable as a model by which horror texts and their audiences can be understood.

The chapters that follow on from here are more concerned with showcasing possible areas of study which may be pertinent to how pleasure is gained by individuals from horror texts. Part two, with chapters discussing the importance of understanding the genre as a whole and the connoisseurship involved in the recognition of such, as well as horror fans' challenge to censorship codes, is predominantly concerned with how fans of horror react to horror texts. Here Hills uses examples from a variety of sources including fan websites, interviews and observations made by other members of academia in their own work on the subject.

Part three goes on to develop this fan based view of reactions to horror, with Hills here looking at what he terms 'para-sites' of horror. These 'para-sites' include horror shown on television, including such cult programmes as *The X-Files* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*: real-life horror, such as that regularly seen on news programmes: and theory-horror, that is, the role horror (and ideas of the gothic) play in theoretical works more generally.

Part four follows with investigations of how notions of intertextuality affect both audience and critical responses to horror texts and the use of postmodernism in doing so. Chapters on the intertextual and postmodern aspects of both the fiction works of Kim Newman and the *Scream* film franchise are used to highlight another aspect of what it is about horror texts that audiences gain pleasure from. In this case Hills uses these examples to emphasise the importance, as previous chapters have also done, of a well-rounded knowledge of the horror genre as a whole for audience understanding and realisation of what is being presented by individual texts. These final chapters appear to be a culmination of the work of the previous chapters' investigations, in which Hills seems to be building up to the point that audiences who enjoy and are engaged by horror texts do so to be part of a select group who 'get the point' of horror, or who understand the intertextual references that are often presented to them through the medium; that liking horror is like being in an exclusive club that only those cool enough or brave enough can enter or fully understand.

Throughout the book a large number of sources are cited and an extensive amount of research has obviously been undertaken here. As such, the book is an excellent means of coming

to terms with and understanding the complex issues and arguments that frame the study of how pleasure is gained from texts both generally and more specifically in terms of horror. Hills looks at relevant academic work on the theory based approaches to the subject, then uses a wide range of counter arguments (often from academic sources) to work through the flaws in these arguments. He then goes on to introduce a number of ways in which the study of how pleasure may be gained from horror texts using a wide and informed variety of methodologies and resources.

On the whole then, *The Pleasures of Horror* is a useful addition to work in this area of study. It both acknowledges previous work on the subject, making the reader aware of the numerous arguments surrounding the topic, while introducing more areas of possible interest for the study of how pleasure is gained from such texts. The displeasure gained from the genre by some is acknowledged and dealt with briefly in the conclusion, with Hills himself stating that more work needs to be done in this area but is a project within itself.

Well-written and thoroughly researched, the book is well worth investigation by anyone interested in this field of study. The book does not build up an all-encompassing theory of how pleasure is gained from horror texts, it does however work through possible ways this pleasure may be produced in an intelligent and informed manner.