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Review by Charlotte Gough

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## ***SLEEPING WITH THE LIGHTS ON: AN UNSETTLING STORY OF HORROR (2018) BY DARRYL JONES***

Review by Charlotte Gough

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Jones, Darryl, *Sleeping with the Lights On: An Unsettling Story of Horror*. Oxford University Press, 2018. 208pp.

*Sleeping with the Lights On* (2018) begins by foregrounding Horror, and particularly the spectacle of violence, as “encoded in art from its very beginnings” and thus an essential part of our cultural identity, despite the many contentions, debates, and cultural distinctions surrounding taste, class, and form that the genre continues to contend with (2). Darryl Jones introduces this work with a succinct and comprehensive overview of these very contentions by cleverly establishing the similarities between biblical and classical literary imagery with that of ‘video nasties’ and the like from the very opening pages. Indeed, Jones’ ability to both define and dispel problematic critical definitions, frameworks, and terminology that have categorised and arguably confined Horror as a form – including Gothic Terror or Gothic Horror, Uncanny, Sublime *et cetera* – deftly and unpretentiously in so few words, and in a tone suitable for seasoned scholars and casual consumers alike, is a unique and commendable skill. This continues throughout, as the author stitches together case studies across the mediums of literature, film, television, and even comic books in apt Frankenstein fashion, everything from epoch-making classics like *Dracula* (1987) to more obscure pockets of brilliance like *Tales of the Unexpected* (1979–1988), to which abridged theoretical concepts are strategically applied, with remarkable ease and equal attention. Not allowing for any distinct gendered or historiographical readings is in fact the whole basis of the book, rather than its shortcoming, as such approaches have invariably been covered previously and in, at times a reductive, isolation and specificity. Whilst not covering any ‘new’ scholarly territory *per se*, such a work is so important because of its sheer breath of succinctly delivered and carefully consolidated knowledge. This passionate, encyclopaedic overview allows Jones to appropriately identify and demonstrate the distinct plurality and, in his words, “tentacular” nature of this much-discussed (and much-maligned) genre which indiscriminately “[spreads] everywhere” into vast and varied territories (139).

Horror, for Jones, is so crucial in art because it has the power to “reflect” and “shape” reality by both forming and informing cultural anxieties as an intrinsic part of, as well as a means of understanding, civilisation in the broadest sense of the word (original emphasis, 3). He maintains however, that whilst being ever-present, Horror’s key themes are not fixed but “mutable and contingent, [products] of historical context”; cyclical and familiar yet constantly adapting through the social issues and technologies of the increasingly modern world (21). This very indefinability and

contradiction in ideology is an integral part of the genre's popularity and ubiquity; as Jones observes, "the history of horror is also the history of outraged responses to horror" (13). The author continues to emphasise this anarchic and marginal power of Horror, which, at its best, is meant to "shock us out of our respectability or complacency" as a transgressive and political tool in form and content, occupying an exhilarating "dialogic relationship between radicalism [...] and conservatism" (15). Another well-sustained and sharp observation is the concept of ritual; those depicted in Horror texts as well as the ritualistic aspect of Horror audience participation, "based on the [repetitive] acting out of predetermined roles [and] on the precise fulfilment of expectations"(16). Jones' main arguments thus ultimately present the representation and experience of Horror, multi-layered and problematic as that may be, as a crucial means of articulating the simultaneously personal and universal nature of fear – and even wider human existence – through texts that are at once transgressive and traditionalist, experimental, and debt-owing to the thematic legacy of their predecessors.

This notion is reflected in the book's structure, which is organised thematically around specific yet historically-broad concepts including "Monsters," "The Occult and Supernatural," "Horror and the Body," "Horror and the Mind," and "Science and Horror." These are followed by the "Afterword" which reflects on the state of the genre since the millennium – how that, or even if that, can be defined – and points towards its possible future, all of which I shall elaborate upon. Firstly however, one cannot rightly discuss the book's content without acknowledging it as a homage-paying Horror artefact in itself. A small, black treasure for a true Horror fan: the pages are edged in black recalling great classical tomes and its front cover has a lightbulb cut-out to reveal the artwork on the inner pages. These have a blood-drenched background depicting various silhouetted motifs: the zombie, the werewolf, the ghost, *et cetera* – which, to illustrate the book's content, seamlessly overlap to present one complete, romantically-horrifying depiction of the genre's metamorphic, metaphoric mainstays throughout history.

The first chapter, "Monsters," continues from the introduction's concluding statement, that "it falls upon each generation [...] to create its own monsters" (27). Jones sets the tone for subsequent chapters by focusing on themes, at once specific and sweeping, seen at the very beginnings of civilisation, which act as conduits for comprehensive discussions that span historical periods and cultural formats. Here, he uses Vampires and Zombies to consider the 'Monster' as a physical and political category, as a "means of managing contemporary threats, crises and anxieties" surrounding race and capitalism, invasion, and infection (34). Furthermore, the use of Sigmund Freud's 'Totem and Taboo' framework is an especially fascinating elucidation of our simultaneous 'attraction' and 'disgust' in response to the monster and indeed the genre itself more broadly. This reviewer particularly enjoyed the idea of monsters being crucial to the development and "spectral" viewing-experience of early cinema (45). Jones ends the majority of his chapters by helpfully pointing towards contemporary examples – in this case, the proliferation of Zombie texts since the financial crash of 2007 – acknowledging the interest in Horror's modernity and progression. This makes *Sleeping* a text which speaks to, as well as beyond, its own time period in the spirit of its case study texts.

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The following chapter on “The Occult and the Supernatural” includes subheadings on The Devil as well as Ghosts, covering issues surrounding religion, existential meaning, and evil in context of the spirit and spiritualism as concepts. A particularly ingenious feature of this chapter was Jones’ comparison of Matthew Lewis’ *The Monk* (1796) with contemporary traces of ‘Satanic Ritual Abuse’ in ‘Pizzagate’ (2016); Jones notes Horror’s cyclical affiliation with moral panics, censorship, and conspiracies as popular culture continues to inform and is “implicated in [...] social and political discourse” (69). “Ghosts and Spirits” seemed however to be the most lacking section of the book; to link the thematic issues around ghosts with discussion of occult beliefs and practices covered elsewhere in the chapter would have perhaps made it more cohesive. This would have benefitted from an (albeit brief) exploration of the ghost in terms of modern technology, with the contemporary phenomenon, widespread impact, and publically-shared experience of television parapsychology and broadcast live-séances, for example; seen in such texts as the *Most Haunted* series (2002-2010) and the parodic TV-event *Ghostwatch* (1992).

Chapters Three and Four, “Horror and the Body” and “Horror and the Mind,” provide well-organised and complimentary mediations on the genre’s continued exploration of the symbolic mind and body ‘dualism’ myth. This relates to the societal identity-politics reading which Jones efficiently illustrates using John Carpenter’s concept of ‘left-wing’ (the enemy ‘within’) versus ‘right-wing’ Horror (the ‘outside’ other). In terms of ‘the Body,’ the focus on the Werewolf motif to anchor the theme of ‘Metamorphosis’ was a particular strength of the book. Here, 1980s Body-Horror, consumer-capitalist exploitation, and cannibalism are utilised for an expertly interwoven analysis. Indeed, the wolf, read cross-textually as a potent symbol of female sexual maturity, was also a highlight. “Horror and the Mind” then covered the topics of madness, the double, and serial killers, noting the genre’s continual destabilisation of our sense of individuality and unified self. This section would have benefitted from further discussion of subjective mental illness and trauma representation – through the language of narrative ruptures or fragmentations, for example – in these visual and literary psychological Horror texts. To conclude the ‘Mind’ chapter with suburbia in slasher films made it seem rather incomplete, but this reviewer of course acknowledges that the book’s length and tone did not permit much further detail in any specific direction.

Chapter Five, “Science and Horror”, returned, as the book does throughout, to key classical texts that heavily influenced the development of Horror as we know it and in its many forms, such as Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (1859). This arguably originated and encapsulated the crises of faith and debates surrounding the nature and fallibility of humanity which characterise so many texts of the genre. One of Jones’ most interesting observations here is the comparison between the mad Promethean intellectual and Enlightenment distrust of science, with the maniacal modern-day computer geek and millennial technophobia.

Chapter Six’s afterword nicely concludes the book with an attempt to define Horror since the millennium and tentatively predict the future of the genre in light of recent political, environmental, and technological changes. Here, the idea of Horror’s anti-mainstream qualities is further stressed as the source of its true potency and cultural influence: “recognition means respectability, and

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respectability is the very thing which horror exists to confront" (141). Jones uses this as an opportunity to celebrate the 1970s as a key, dangerous decade for Horror, and, by comparison, identifies his own term "Unhorror" drawing upon Michel Foucault's critique of the culture industry (141). Unhorror, he observes, is the "disparate" state of contemporary Horror with its "endless (re)cycle of sequels, remakes and reboots" (143). Citing the *Twilight* franchise (2008–2012) as an example, Jones laments the "marginal identities [and horror tropes] [...] totally incorporated within capitalism," since the millennium, "as a vehicle for [mass] marketing" which ultimately threatens the genre's ability to suitably scare modern audiences (141). With this however comes the recognition of the previously-established basis of *Sleeping*, which is that Horror - as "complex, multifaceted [...]" and at its best troubling" – does not "attract the same audience" (142). Indeed, Catherine Spooner's concept of 'Happy Gothic' is identified as a potential counter-narrative to Horror's supposed commodification, appealing to subcultural and underrepresented communities (142). Jones then identifies the most recent trends of post-millennial Horror material which reflect such contemporary issues as climate change, "racist justice," national identity – shown in "Arctic/Antarctic Horror," the British 'return' to Folk Horror, and the boom of Asian Horror, for example (148-151). Finally, it is suggested that the location of Horror is now "moving, with geopolitics away from an American axis" (158) and exemplary work is to be found outside of the traditional literary and cinematic realms. Jones attests, not since *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) has Horror enjoyed such quality and saturation on television, which now offers such texts as *American Horror Story* (2011–current) and *True Detective* (2014–current) (160). Even beyond that, the advancement of the internet, podcasts, and 'meme culture' have provided some of the most startling examples of modern Horror to date which, as Jones admits in the final lines, may point towards the ultimate future of the genre.

**BIONOTE**

**Charlotte Gough** is a PhD candidate at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK. Her research examines the representation of, and relationship between, the 1980s and 1990s 'Satanic Panic' and masculinity in American Gothic film and television. She has previously been published in *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies*.