



4-1-2015

Der skandinavische Horrorfilm. Kultur- und ästhetikgeschichtliche Perspektiven (The Scandinavian Horror Film. Cultural historical and Aesthetical Historical Perspectives)

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Recommended Citation

Königstedt, Christiane (2015) "Der skandinavische Horrorfilm. Kultur- und ästhetikgeschichtliche Perspektiven (The Scandinavian Horror Film. Cultural historical and Aesthetical Historical Perspectives)," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 19 : Iss. 1 , Article 41.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol19/iss1/41>

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Der skandinavische Horrorfilm. Kultur- und ästhetikgeschichtliche Perspektiven (The Scandinavian Horror Film. Cultural historical and Aesthetical Historical Perspectives)

Abstract

In this book review I discuss a recently published anthology on "The Scandinavian Horror film". The authors are well aware that the existence of this genre is not to be taken for granted, and instead ponder films by directors ranging from Carl T. Dreyer, Ingmar Bergman to Lars von Trier and beyond, who in their work dealt with horrible sensations in the past 120 years. Focussing especially on the sources and means of the horror sensation, the anthology investigates the characteristics and common features of the films in discussion, as well as their US-American adaptations.

Keywords

Scandinavian Horror film

Author Notes

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Niels Penke (ed.), *Der skandinavische Horrorfilm. Kultur- und ästhetikgeschichtliche Perspektiven* (The Scandinavian Horror film. Cultural historical and aesthetical historical perspectives), Bielefeld: Transkript, 2013.

The anthology to be reviewed here undertook the endeavour of discussing “The Scandinavian Horror film,” a genre which has rarely been seen worth naming because most scholarly work on “Horror films” focuses on the US. Since the production of Scandinavian Horror films is currently in bloom internationally (cf. Penke, p. 8), it is very appreciable that eleven authors came together to investigate the historical highlights of the genre as well as the many contemporary remakes of Scandinavian films in Hollywood. Penke begins in the introduction with pointing out that for most famous Scandinavian directors Horror films were single projects, and that there has never been a leading figure who would have had an enduring stylistic impact. Instead, many internationally renowned directors such as Victor Sjöström, Carl Theodor Dreyer, Ingmar Bergmann and Lars von Trier occupied themselves with real fear and horror in their works. With Viggo Larsen, Penke extends “horror” to the tradition of the “fantastic film,” which induces feelings of horror or fear in the audience by bringing tales of witches, vampires, and even Sherlock Holmes and H. C. Anderson to the screen (Penke, pp. 8–12).

Against this background, the anthology addresses not only the means and the sensation of “horror,” but also the manifestation of “horror” in different cultural settings and in relation to gender, space, and sometimes humorous national self-reflection.

The volume opens with “Infigurations of 'The Death' in the classic Victor Sjöströms KÖRKARLEN” (pp. 17–36). The author identifies the film as “artfilm, redundant of the poetic of affects, typical for later horrorfilms” and encourages further research about the impact of its structure and aesthetics in later works. Carl Theodor Dreyer's VAMPYR (pp. 37–50) is seen as a performative work of the absolute present. The reduced dramatic

composition would function as a means to make visible the “abyss of the real” and the “sense of nothingness” that creates the weird and the unreal: “[...]when all meaning has vanished [...], there remains the horror.” Doing so, the author points—like several others in the book—at a possible value of further discussions about the means and topics through which Scandinavian movies create the sensation of horror. This is also the subject of one of the rather rare discussions of Lars von Trier's mini-series *RIGET*, which evokes a sense of the “abyss of reality“ or “a world in between,” extended to an “encounter with the evil other“ (pp. 99–126). Novelist Daniel Kehlmann contributes a brief essay reflection on Lars von Trier's *ANITICHRIST* (pp. 177–180), in which an idyll becomes transformed into brute supernatural evil and disgust. Once more it is shown how “untamed horror” may leak slowly through the surface of everyday reality.

Ingmar Bergman's *VARGTIMMEN* is the subject of the next contribution (pp. 51–98), in which the author considers the development of the horrorfilm genre in general—from *Calligari* to Bergman. This film is Bergman's only excursion into the horror genre, which “revives the old and valued tradition that melts together horror and fantastic after more than three decades” (p. 97).

The reader contains as well several chapters concerned with specific topics in relation to the horror genre, such as the censorship policies in Sweden and Germany that informed the production of the meta-film *EVIL ED* (pp. 129–154). With the problem of censorship for the splatter-horror genre having been anticipated in the film already, “the censoring of amputation scenes led to 'amputations' within the film material” and increased paradoxically the originally intended parodistic effect. Another film of that category, *DØD SNØ* (pp. 261–283), is taken to be the first Scandinavian (Nazi-)Zombie Comedy. The author critically discusses the Norwegian collaboration with the national-socialists in WWII as it is processed in the public discourse, before returning to the function of humour in Horror/Splatter parodies.

A different, rather technical angle has been taken in the discussion of VILLMARK and NABOER (pp. 157–176). The author investigates how the use of an auditive analysis is able to reveal the difference between characters according to their use of language, which remains hidden to non-Scandinavians but is a crucial dramatic means. The second contribution by the same author (pp. 181–208) ponders different modes of internationality and national self-reflection based on the manifold references to “The Shining” in FRITT VILT. This article in particular demonstrates the impact of American Horrorfilm culture on Scandinavian oeuvres. Secondly, she discusses the Icelandic production REYKJAVIK WHALE WATCHING MASSACRE, in which the author sees the problem of animal protection and the meaning of the whaling sector for the national consciousness, reflected on in a darkly humorous way. These aspects are complemented with a later discussion on the vital remake culture of Scandinavian films in America. Pointing out that “Scandinavian horror films” are taken to be a special genre, this author compares LET ME IN (2010), NIGHTWATCH (1997), THE INVISIBLE (2007) and SOLISTICE (2008) (pp. 286–312). She concludes that, in the process of selection, re-interpretation, and modification, the inter-text may vary—especially in transnational remakes—almost indefinitely according to different cultural ideals, values, contextual knowledge and prejudices.

A take on vampires, gender, and, more precisely, on the breaking of traditional gender roles, is delivered on the case of Swedish ‘sleepwalkers’ (pp. 209–239). The author discusses LÅT DEN RATTE KOMMA IN and the vampire Eric Northman in TRUE BLOOD, highlighting the significance of displaying Swedish somnambulists transgressing socio-cultural boundaries. Another article, which may be seen as rounding up the thoughts about the sources of horror within this anthology, deals with gender in combination with “space.” Discussed is the only Finnish film in the anthology, SAUNA (pp. 242–260), in which a sauna in a swamp, far from known civilisation, emanates supernatural destructive but cleansing forces to a devastating end. According to the author, the film prepares audience members by

letting them observe the slow deconstruction of the male identity of the main character, from soldier to faceless monster. Again, similar to the discussion of *RIGET*, “Horror” here is conceived as “[...] the old myths leaking through the cracks of modern knowledge” (p. 253).

Intended to highlight important films and topics within Scandinavian Horror, this anthology is indeed a success in terms of not only outlining a rather diffuse genre, but also providing a well-informed overview of the past 120 years of Scandinavian cinema. Quite surely the reader will find her- or himself at some point in the next independent video store, searching for one or the other gem, and—due to the newness of such a project—probably being hooked in a lively discussion with the store's owners.

Academically, it is to be regarded as a pilot project that may be helpful in unlocking the topic for further research and discussion, especially as it relates to current religion and film literature such as Doug E. Cowan's *Sacred Terror* (2008). According to Cowan, horror films scare us when they tap into certain “sociophobics,” or cinematic shorthands that address our shared cultural fears. At least in a US context, he finds these experiences of “terror” often connected to “religion” (pp. 56 f.). As it concerns Northern European horror, Cowan’s understanding of “sociophobics” relates directly to the “horrorful” sensation explored in the anthology by Penke, where it is similarly described as a “*sense of nothingness*” in the “world in between,” “the abyss of the real,” “a force of nature,” “the old myths leaking through the cracks of modern knowledge,” and even as an “encounter with the evil other.” The authors repeatedly point at “religion” being portrayed in the form of encounters with these repressed and forgotten, but still powerful myths.

Many Scandinavian films address in some way these “empty realms” without offering a precise definition of this experience. When it comes to the forces of nature and their ability to overwhelm the human psyche (e.g. *VARGTIMMEN*), Scandinavian directors imbue the atmosphere of their films with a sense of indirectness and mystery. In the case of *RIGET*, the supposedly sterile and rational world of a hospital is invaded; in *SAUNA*, symbols of national

identity become inverted and thus enforce changes in familiar worldviews (cf. Cowan pp. 67 f.). GOD (or the devil) is rarely present explicitly, but they nevertheless serve as “sacred” symbols that are explored through a pre- or post-Christian framework.

As a result, this book will be interesting for disciplines other than Media Studies, especially among those who might find it fruitful to dedicate more attention to the role of myths encountering secular rationality within horror settings. Much like the world established by horror films, everyday experiences of life are often marked by mystery. Thus, as is evident in a Scandinavian context, horror can also reflect collective life experiences, which, while expressed indirectly, still belong to “the sacred canopy” that Cowan calls “sociophobics.” Cowan’s list could easily be applied to these Scandinavian films, even while recognizing that Scandinavian countries are much more secularized than the United States. So a straightforward comparison would be too easy or even wrong given statistics about church membership and belief in God or a higher order (see the International Social Survey Programme 2008).

The book leaves the reader wishing for a clearer focus that would more readily connect the relatively high quality contributions with each other, a critique that is underscored by the absence of a final conclusion. Nevertheless, for reasons named above, the anthology constitutes a noteworthy contribution. Since the authors do investigate different research questions using different approaches and methodologies, it is also a valuable reader for students who want to develop their own approaches to the medium of “horror film” as such.