

BOOK REVIEWS

The American Nightmare: Essays On The Horror Film.

by Robin Wood, Andrew Britton, Richard Lippe and Tony Williams, Festival of Festivals, Toronto, 1979.

Readers familiar with Robin Wood's writings on the cinema will recognize this book as a collection of beautifully stated insights. Wood has a rare ability for discovering patterns of meaning in movies through a peculiar combination of mixed methods. Moreover, he is faithful to the cinema's varied character, examining movies such as **Texas Chainsaw Massacre** that few critics take seriously. In **The American Nightmare**, Wood's colleagues Andrew Britton, Richard Lippe and Tony Williams have assisted him with papers on **Martin**, **Jaws**, **The Exorcist** and the symbolism of evil. Unfortunately, all four authors share a fault: they fail to establish a theoretical perspective, and **The American Nightmare** builds a methodological nightmare from shreds and tatters of methods.

Wood refers confidently to the "horror-film's" generic status without revealing his criteria for classification. A "horror-film" appears to be nothing more than a narrative dealing with, or depicting, a "monster." But what is a monster? One may search the history of philosophy for a precise definition without finding the answer. In literature and the cinema, monsters frequently exemplify problems of power and free will: for example, **Gulliver's Travels**, **The Incredible Shrinking Man**, or **Attack of the Fifty Foot Woman**. Yet monsters also take the form of "inhuman" or "incongruous" beings.

Frank N. Furter in **The Rocky Horror Picture Show** is alleged by Wood to be a monster because he represents our fear of libidinal energy. What is the evidence for this claim? Frank does arrive on earth from a "land of night" (the planet Transsexual in the galaxy of Transylvania). He does commit fearful, violent acts. He is "unfashionably" dressed in female "undies." But surely both Frank's murdering tendencies and his costume suggest parody. In fact, he pokes fun at transves-

titles and homosexuals, in addition to "straights." He suggests a parody of drag, a parody developed into a parody of itself. Perhaps he is not a monster but a comedian.

Occasionally, Wood employs the term "monster" to designate an abnormally cruel or wicked person. Yet, if this is really what a monster is, any number of motion pictures qualify as "horror-films." How about **Warrendale** or **Nuit et Brouillard**: are they "horror-films"?

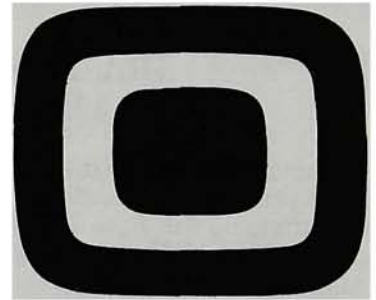
Wood's classification of the cinema into radical and reactionary factions is similarly perplexing and seems to depend upon affective rather than analytical reading of movie-texts. Does **Texas Chainsaw Massacre** treat "cannibalism" as he claims, or, more accurately, "carnivorous behavior"? Can it not be read as a sixties text directly influenced by **Diet For A Small Planet**? Why does Wood believe that **Shivers (The Parasite Murders)** is "single-mindedly about sexual liberation"? Perhaps it is really concerned with urban planning. If this obvious surface-concern is not the case, what function does the movie's tongue-in-cheek "starliner" prologue serve? **Shivers** specifically examines the physical and social space with which apartment dwellers surround themselves. The narrative's infamous bug-parasites may be in bad taste, but they grow logically from the vulgarity of urban high-rise life. Wood may have misread the "tone" of **Shivers**: it owes something to the anti-art of dada yet has the glossy exaggeration of a Warner Brothers cartoon with built-in irony. Does the narrative view sexual liberation "with unmitigated horror," or do the narrative's characters (most of whom represent the Montreal middle-classes) represent that view?

Wood's paper "The Dark Mirror" is probably one of the few interesting pieces on Murnau in English. Unfortunately, the argument is marred by a reference to the "unhealthiness" of Expressionism. Wood is mistaken to believe that German Expressionism was little more than a "style," an "ethos," or an "atmosphere." The character of expressionist art, its intensity, energy, fateful perspective, its outward projection of psychological events, represented a confrontation with Freudian pessimism and with the fin-de-siècle attack on idealism. It encompassed deterministic conclusions that, however unpalatable, cannot be reduced to the com-

forting platitudes of Leavisite "humanism."

Wood sets out to combine analysis of the content of "horror-film" with his account of "the other" (the monster) as it functions within our culture." Hence, despite an oft-stated aversion to theoretical discussion, he entertains a theory of the cinema. However, the aforementioned characterization of movies and society remains undeveloped in the book. What connections can be drawn between cinematic content and audience beliefs or values? Keeping the author's Marxist-Freudian epistemology in mind, should we look for characteristics of a collective audience psyche in the cinema's product? Does a necessary relationship exist between conscious consumption of movie-content and that content's "unconscious significance"? This is a tough question to answer since Wood does not provide statistics regarding the box-office popularity of the movies in question.

Robert McMillan



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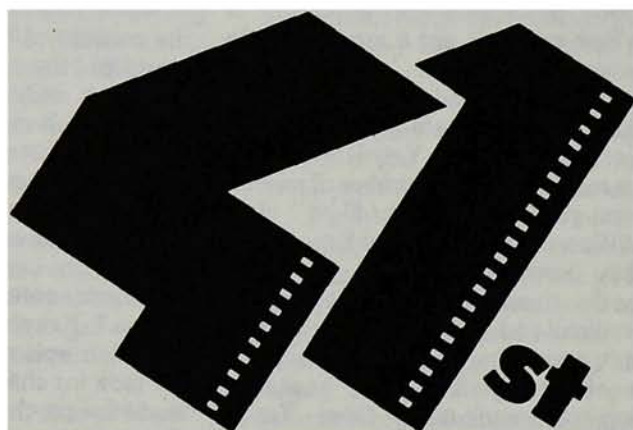
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