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David Roche, Making and Remaking Horror in the 1970s and 2000s: Why Don't They Do It Like They Used To?

Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2014

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Référence(s) :

ROCHE, David, *Making and Remaking Horror in the 1970s and 2000s: Why Don't They Do It Like They Used To?*, Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2014, 335 pages, ISBN 978-1-61703-962-1, hardcover: \$60, kindle: \$45, paperback: \$30.

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Texte intégral

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In his latest book, David Roche compares the horror films of the 1970s with their remakes of the 2000s to answer the question which features as the book's subtitle: Why don't they do it like they used to? With disarming honesty as well as a rigorous theoretical framework, David Roche sets out to investigate why the remakes seemed to him less "disturbing" than the originals, using the criteria delineated by Laurent Jullier in *Qu'est ce qu'un bon film?* (15), especially that of cohesion. His analysis centers on a thorough comparison between four cult horror films of the 1970s—*The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974), *The Hills Have Eyes* (Wes Craven, 1977), *Dawn of the Dead* (George A. Romero, 1978), *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978)—and their remakes (*The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, Marcus Nispel, 2003; *The Hills Have Eyes*, Alexandre Aja, 2006; *Dawn of the Dead*, Zack Snyder, 2004; *Halloween*, Rob Zombie, 2007), although he covers many other horror films as well. As such, Roche's book is a necessary read for anyone interested in horror but also in the evolution and strategies of contemporary American cinema.

The first chapter, entitled "Text, Subtext and Context", builds on Robin Wood's famous article, "The American Nightmare" (in *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, 1986, 70-80), which saw the horror movie as the most progressive genre of the 1970s. The chapter examines the relationship between the films and their historical context, to see whether context is "embedded in the films' structure" (21) and productive of a "subtext," or merely decorative. Roche stresses the importance of the economic crisis in the narrative structure of the originals, especially in *Texas*, where the shortage of fuel forces the teenagers to stay and look for fuel, while the psychotic families of both *Texas* and *Hills* are unemployed in remote areas bypassed by capitalism. In contrast, context is more decorative in the remakes, where the (psychotic) communities function in autonomous economies, disconnected from the main economy and from historical context. *Dawn* is a case in point: whereas the original underlined the mall's commercial function, bringing together the living and the living dead in their appetite for consumption, the remake insists on the mall's social function, where the heroes are shown to be "autonomous selves" (31).

The second chapter examines issues of race, ethnicity, and class, and argues that, even if questions of race and ethnicity are not explicitly present in the originals, they appear metaphorically, through oppositions between blackness

and whiteness for instance in *Halloween*. Furthermore, the hybrid appearance of the monsters calls into question essentialist visions of identity. The remakes are much more explicit about these issues, which are played out across the victims rather than the monsters, but race is often, once again, merely decorative, so that the remakes offer a post-racial vision of America where the historical past is erased.

4In chapter 3, David Roche focuses on the family, building on Robin Wood's analysis which saw it as the central and unifying motif of the horror film of the 1970s. However, Roche uses the concept of immanence rather than Wood's argument that the monster represents the return of the repressed, to highlight "how (the capitalist) order produces its own disorders" (66), and how the original films link the monstrous to the "normal" families. Indeed, the films of the 1970s all imply that "dysfunction is immanent to the functional family" (74), while *Texas* and *Hills* go even further by underlining the symmetry between the monstrous and the normal families. Whereas the patriarchal family is contaminated by the monstrous and thus undermined in the originals, the remakes do not question the validity of the patriarchal family: for example, the 2003 family of *Texas* is well-structured and harmonious, which stands in contrast with the constant quarrels in the 1974 film. Apart from *Halloween*, where family is identified as the direct causality for the monster's behavior, thus responding to Wood's thesis, community has become more important than family in the remakes. Therefore, no link is made between monstrous and healthy families: the mutants of *Hills* do not form a family, so that the structuring parallel between two dysfunctional patriarchal families in the original film has entirely disappeared from the remake.

5Chapter 4 analyzes gender and sexuality, more specifically male masculinity, "deviant" (hetero)sexualities and the figure of the heroine-victim (Carol Clover's "Final Girl"), to see if the originals and remakes "promote an essentialist vision of gender and sexuality" or "question traditional notions by emphasizing that these aspects of identity are cultural constructs" (83). Whereas the original *Hills* and *Dawn* highlighted the constructiveness of patriarchy and male masculinity, playing with the tropes of the action movie, the remakes unambiguously praise masculinity "and its capacity to safeguard the family and the community" (91). The originals are indeed more unstable in terms of gender identity, especially *Dawn* and *Texas*, the latter presenting a sexually ambivalent killer. *Texas* (2003), on the other hand, is more interested in violence than sex, which it directs, interestingly, mostly at male victims. Roche shows that the remakes tend to "make aspects implicit in the films of the 1970s more explicit" (101): *Halloween* (2007) thus links the killer's pathology with his socially conditioned view of the female body as abject. Informed by feminism, the remakes indeed critique the fetishization of female bodies by associating it with unsavoury male characters, and give more agency to the Final Girl, especially *Texas* (2003). However, the remakes thus titillate their viewers with "bootylicious" bodies, and tend to maintain phallogocentric discourses which associate power with the "masculine," whether it be male masculinity in *Dawn* or female masculinity in *Texas*.

6Chapter 5 examines the position the films develop toward the history of the horror genre and the Gothic tradition. While the originals tend to banalize the Gothic, the remakes are much more classical in their use of the Gothic, so that the ordinary white house of *Texas* (1974) looks much more like the House of Usher in the remake and the mall is much darker in *Dawn* (2004). Roche thus argues that the remakes are less disturbing because their approach to horror is more conventional, hence more reassuring. As remakes, the films are caught in a paradox, having to invoke their predecessors but also underlining their differences, which they do mainly in terms of plot, characterization and subtext: by presenting the family background for the killer's pathology, *Halloween* insists on causality, and thus frames the monster, like *Dawn*, which underlines the otherness of the living dead.

7In chapters 6 and 7, Roche develops a detailed formal analysis of his main corpus, focusing on "dread, terror, and horror as aesthetic categories" (154). Roche shows how the horror films of the 1970s are "categorically interstitial" (an expression borrowed from Noël Carroll), and undermine the opposition between "human" and "monstrous," in agreement with their political subtext questioning binary divisions between identities. Rather than showing the monsters in all their horror, the remakes tend to increase the danger factor, so that they are "terrifying" rather than "horrifying." Roche convincingly demonstrates that the emphasis on terror reduces the range of the representations of horror in the remakes, and goes on to analyze the formal strategies of the originals and the remakes in chapter 7, focusing on the "cohesion" between the formal strategies adopted by the films and their political subtext.

8While the films of the 1970s, especially *Texas* (1974), inaugurated many of the formal strategies which are now common in slasher films, for instance frame-within-the-frame-composition or POV shots reflecting the instability of point of view, they tend to go back and forth between dread, terror, and horror, thus violating interstitial categories, like their monsters. Because of their emphasis on terror, the remakes contain fewer scenes where the characters and viewers can contemplate the horror of the monsters (this is especially true when comparing the remakes of *Hills* and *Dawn* with their originals), so that horror as a spectator emotion tends to be equated with violence and pain. Chapter 7 ends with a very useful summary of the different strategies deployed in the four remakes, based mainly on the slasher and action movie. Roche concludes that even if the remakes do implement specific formal strategies to suit their subtexts, they use less varied strategies so that they "run out of breath in the final act" (272), and tend to resemble each other.

9The last two chapters developing the formal strategies to represent horror, terror and dread, as well as the "tentative conclusion" on the remakes' quest for realism and verisimilitude, were to me the most fascinating and original parts of *Making and Remaking Horror*. Throughout the book, Roche combines the best of French attention to formal analysis with British and American concerns about questions

of identity. Indeed, Roche displays an impressive mastery of theory: every word or concept used is defined, justified, and backed by references encompassing French, British and American literature including the works of David Bordwell, Noël Carroll, Carol Clover, Gérard Genette, François Jost, Laurent Jullier, Jean-Baptiste Thoret, Linda Williams, Robin Wood, and countless others. This is one of the strengths of the book, but it can make for difficult reading, especially in the first chapters, where there are quotes or references in almost every sentence. *Making and Remaking Horror* is, however, extremely clear and methodical—sometimes a little too methodical, so that I found myself rebelling against its systematic denigration of contemporary remakes, even if Roche does highlight the qualities of Rob Zombie’s *Halloween*. Indeed, Roche can be a little too negative about the remakes, especially in his chapters on race and gender. The chapter on race, ethnicity and class is perhaps the least convincing, first of all because it mixes race and class in a general concept of “identity”—a separate chapter on class would have been interesting and perhaps more productive. Secondly, there is something to be said for the explicitness of the remakes on the subject of race, especially in *Dawn* (2004), which deals with racial tensions upfront and stars Ving Rhames as the muscular black policeman who has some of the best lines and best scenes of the film, and survives in the end. In terms of gender, Roche gives little credit to *Texas* (2003) for developing the role of the Final Girl and emphasizing her agency, which cannot simply be reduced to “female masculinity.”

10However, as my comments reflect, *Making and Remaking Horror* is a deeply engaging book, for horror neophytes as well as fans. A must-read for anyone interested in horror, David Roche’s book is also a major contribution to the field of Film Studies, masterfully combining rigorous formal analysis with a cultural studies approach to shed new light on many of its key issues, such as the remake, the aesthetics of contemporary Hollywood, the Gothic on screen, or verisimilitude.

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Pour citer cet article

Référence électronique

Marianne Kac-Vergne, « David Roche, *Making and Remaking Horror in the 1970s and 2000s: Why Don't They Do It Like They Used To?* », *Transatlantica* [En ligne], 1 | 2015, mis en ligne le 22 novembre 2015, consulté le 23 juillet 2018. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/7420>

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