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Themed Issue: The Design and Componentry of Horror

Introduction: A Genreless Horror

Eugenie Brinkema

‘[T]here is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres,’

(Jacques Derrida, ‘The Law of Genre’ [1980]: 65)

‘yet such participation never amounts to belonging’

(—how that first sentence ends).

Horror has historically been mired in the conceptual swamp of negative affect. Because its basal meaning refers to ‘a painful emotion compounded of loathing and fear’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*), the term has produced a circular scholarship that approaches its definition through spectator, viewer, user, and player feeling, finding therein only what the generic stamp has already proclaimed. As in Linda Williams’ taxonomy of ‘body genres,’ horror is presupposed to be that genre that disturbs and moves the body in thrilling, disgusting ways, and the broader generic implication has been the durable but quasi-tautological sense that ‘horror’ connotes the ways in which various texts inspire such reactions. Accordingly, visual and media studies have largely either focused on the tropes, themes, and things taken to prompt that affective result (e.g., monsters, assailants, terrible places); traced the permutations of such tropes, themes, and things (as a history of elements); or made broad claims for the significance of a genre thusly centered

on the elicitation of negative affect—a glossed version of Althusser’s notion of ‘expressive causality,’ which he attributes to Hegel, in which narrative productions are the phenomenal expressions of cultural essences. (Ideological, psychoanalytic, and cultural studies approaches to horror as the return of [the, some, any] repressed share at least some of this impulse.) This generic approach to horror studies—with its praxis of adjudicating inclusions (and tracing exclusions), taxonomizing rules for membership, and articulating a set of expectations so tenacious that they are secured precisely through departure, self-conscious violation, and postmodern knowingness—has dominated the field for thirty years.

This special issue of the *Journal of Visual Culture* grew out of the editors’ sense that this circular impulse towards generification is problematic for multiple reasons: at minimum, it often is the case that works classified as horror on thematic grounds fail to horrify, while other texts not acknowledged as horrific in classical genre treatments do produce moments of disturbing affective intensity—disgust, loathing, revulsion, dread, terror, anxiety, and fear—through specific formal, schematic, notational, constructed structures. At the same time, emerging treatments of cross-platform horrors risk producing claims about ‘gaming horror’ or ‘televisual horror’ that merely read new textual specificities in relation to a received canon of generic qualities inherited from films. Multiplying genre membership across media formats by reifying a stable notion of what that membership entails impoverishes both the potential affectivity of horror and the diversity of the broader media culture that navigates and is navigated by bad affect. As with the epigraph(s) to this introduction, the separate clauses of a crystallizing line from Derrida’s ‘The Law of Genre,’ the risk is ever in confusing what he dubs the law of genre—a standard of unity, a test of distinctness, an establishment of limit—and the law of the law of genre, that while every genre contains a defining mark (by minimal definition), said mark

is not itself within that genre. This means that any given horror text is both classified and declassified by the problem of generic membership—its impurity is a participation that is never a belonging.

For poststructuralism, this paradoxical dimension functions as an origin of interpretation, opening up fields of possibilities in relation to any form. Consider, for example, the utility of its post-generic logic in thinking through something like Drew Goddard and Joss Whedon's 2012 meta-horror, database-horror, platform-horror extraordinaire *The Cabin in the Woods*, in which the film reflexively deploys stock generic conventions in its 'upstairs' teenagers-in-eerie-location narrative, but requires that criticism relinquish precisely those aspects in order to grapple with the grid of possible database inclusions in the 'downstairs' narrative conceit of panoptic controllers who manipulate the conditions of possibility 'upstairs' (the meta-/hyper-text if literally, architecturally, figured as hypotactic). Rather than reflexively subverting conventions (the knowingness Philip Brophy, Jonathan Lake Crane and others have aligned with the quintessential postmodern horror sensibility), *Cabin* effects platform leaps, spatialized and homologized in the glass grid of all possible monstrous narrative components that might have arrived in the textual universe 'upstairs,' but did not. If laws of genre explain the logic of inclusive membership, the law of the law of genre points to the failure to account for this grid from within any generic heuristic. Hence, the intention of this issue is to elude these limitations of genre through the theoretical egress promised by the transmedial capaciousness of 'visual culture.' The nine diverse contributors attempt to think horror as a fundamentally transmedial affect bound up with design and composition, with componentry and interactivity, with worlds and events in place of a stable, locatable roster of nasty epistemologies, returned repressions, monstrous ontologies, or disgusting tropes.

While any genre-based approach involves classifications and taxonomies to produce the descriptive coherence desired by critical and industrial practices, emphasizing horror as a problem of design and componentry does just the opposite, opening up fields of possibility for thinking horror in unexpected places, within unexpected juxtapositions, even as a dimension internal to the mutable ecologies and mediations of technological forms themselves. The contributors to this issue deploy approaches that enable, even demand, new inquiries—into horror not just within but *as* visual culture, horror as an affect itself aesthetically, structurally, and compositionally designed, and horror as a transmedial affective mode not reducible to rigid, cinematically-generated models. Our collective contention is that studying horror as a problematic of aesthetics, form, design, element, and composition opens new avenues for thought by insisting that textual structures and components are not incidental to affective charge but are indeed responsible *for* it. The broader questions thus provoked include: What does it mean to structure (any) transmedial franchise around the exploration of an affect without a shared set of narrative figures? What does it mean to design an affect that will operate across different media platforms; inversely, what might it mean to design textual and material components in order to rend affective intensities? How might rethinking horror as a genreless, transmedial, purely affective problematic open up a new understanding of other similarly entrenched genres, other affects—negative, positive, and hybrid?

This approach to horror within the rubric of visual culture enabled our diverse contributors to explore strange affinities and non-narrative (even radically anti-narrative) components of the designed components of negative affect. Longer essays mixed with shorter studies proliferate media forms and theoretical approaches—drawing on genealogies ranging from H. P. Lovecraft to Heidegger, from Eisensteinian theories of excess to the recent affective

turn. The pieces consider synesthetic assaults against diegetic characters and viewers in the television series *Hannibal*, the structure of ordinality across the teen exploitation franchise *Final Destination*, and a university archive that privileges the symbiotic relationship of VHS and horror movies; while one closely analyzes video games that mobilize affect through representational techniques that occlude their status as representationally framed, another explores broad figurations of the slaughterhouse in activist food documentaries. One piece returns to the site of games to reread emptiness and *horror vacui*, thereby intersecting with another contribution that explores the development of dread in *Alien*'s set design and Lee Bontecou's post-apocalyptic wall-mounted sculptures. What bonds these essays together is an emphasis on the generative juxtaposition of the visual and compositional elements that cut across platforms to figure horror as a designed affective problematic. This consideration ends by returning to an origin of sorts, Noël Carroll's *The Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (Routledge, 1990), one of the earliest and most influential transmedial theories of art-horror. On the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of its publication, 'The Design and Componentry of Horror' concludes with an interview with the noted film scholar and aesthetic philosopher in order to probe how horror texts and platforms in the intervening decades have or have not affected his scholarship on the subject. Carroll's groundbreaking contribution to horror studies provided literary, film, and media scholars with a taxonomy for thinking art-horror in relation to plotted curiosity and narrative form and offered an alternative to the psychoanalytic and ideological models that had, at that time, previously dominated. It remains a crucial point of departure for horror scholars in a wide range of disciplines. Even for those who depart from Carroll's cognitivist methodology or conclusions (several of which he revisits in the interview), it is without question a text to be reckoned with, and on the occasion of this issue, Carroll reflects

on contemporary films, digital media, video games and televisual monsters, and the paradoxes, familiar and new, that govern his philosophy of horror today, a philosophy that, as it did twenty-five years ago, is still durably bound to the aesthetic. In rethinking horror's negative affect across a wide range of media, the aim of this special issue is precisely to retain that notion at the heart of any thinking of horror.

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