Horror Theory Now: Thinking About Horror

Horror's capacity to delve intimately into the human psyche at the same time as reflecting the preoccupations of society more widely makes it a mode that is particularly open to theoretical approaches. It is also a topic, whether in fiction, film, or other media, that attracts a great deal of concern over its potentially negative effects. At the same time, enthusiasts extol its virtues in terms of allowing a safe exploration of fear, fostering communities of like-minded individuals, and even being fun. Indeed, horror has been playful since its earliest inceptions, and continues to be so in the twenty-first century, especially after its close entanglement with postmodernism at the turn of the millennium. In film, genre theory, aesthetic approaches, and psychoanalysis have loomed large, and in literary studies the conversation has been hugely affected by the dominant idea of the 'Gothic', stemming from the influential wave of sensational novels that appeared in the late eighteenth century and in their Victorian evolutions came to influence the later media of film and television. This chapter will chart the trajectory of horror studies in the twenty-first century and aim to point to the areas likely to prove most fruitful in the future. Horror has a tendency to be cyclical, and so many of the age-old debates continue, even as new and challenging expressions of horror appear and, in their turn, inspire fresh critical perspectives.

Horror Theory at the Turn of the Century

The start of the twenty-first century was a particularly interesting moment for horror theory. A century prior, the late Victorian *fin-de-siècle* had thrown up some of the most enduring horror texts to this day, including Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). In parallel, the psychoanalytic ideas of Sigmund Freud and his contemporaries were proving capable of interpreting these strange tales but at the same time writing Gothic narratives of their own. In Freud's essay 'The Uncanny' (1919), as Nicholas Royle points out, 'Freud is storytelling in ways that make his essay irreducibly literary, touched and energized by the fictional' (Royle 2003, 3). This intertwining of Gothic text and criticism explains why Freud has remained prominent in horror theory, long after having fallen out of fashion in the field of psychology itself. Horror is a genre that is especially capable of absorbing its own criticism and reusing as a template. Twentieth-century horror had been characterised by this inescapable loop in which the mind itself functioned as a kind of haunted house and the distinction between the symbolic and physical nature of the demons scarcely seemed to matter as psychoanalytic theory flowed back into the work of horror authors and filmmakers. On one level this moved towards making some forms of horror theory redundant or at least tautological.

Ken Gelder's brief but significant sketch of the 'field of horror' in the introduction to *The Horror Reader* (2000) perfectly encapsulates this situation. After conducting a prescient survey of forward-looking postcolonial and queer readings, he notes the limitations of horror studies as things stood then:

> The approaches here *remain* semiotic: almost no ethnographic work of any consequence on actual horror audiences has been done, although the occasional pious reminder that horror audiences are as 'diverse' as the field of horror itself may be of as little help to analysis as the weary dismissal of horror as a genre that performs the same task over and over again (Gelder 2000, 6).

Gelder here recognizes the limits of interpretation within a framework that is so wrapped in self-referentiality, and his criticism has been justified by an expansion in the twenty-first century not just of perspectives, but approaches to horror, many of which will be explored here, such as ecocriticism, critical race theory, and reception studies. Nonetheless, what Gelder refers to here as a semiotic approach remains broadly common even within these expanded approaches. The question of what is represented or, to use popular current terminology, 'coded' into horror, remains relevant, especially where it come to monstrosity and what is actually portrayed as horrific.

The position of horror theory in the 1980s and 1990s paralleled wider developments in literary and film criticism. Theory, specifically postmodernism, threw the doors open to the academic study of what has consistently been thought of as a 'low' cultural form, from Gothic novels to horror cinema. As Myra Mendible writes in 1999, 'As theorists of popular culture, we shamelessly cast our gaze on cultural productions that once were "beneath us," recognizing pornography, working-class literature, B-movies, pulp fiction, and soap operas as relevant objects of scrutiny' (Mendible 1999, 71). Horror was very much part of this and, importantly, horror productions themselves were regarded as becoming 'smart', or at least indulging in the kind of intellectual self-referentiality characteristic of postmodernism. In film, the *Scream* franchise (1996-present) exemplifies this trend. *Scream* relies on audience expectations of established slasher movie tropes at the same time as recycling them for a new audience. Director Wes Craven's earlier *New Nightmare* (1994) arguably took this further, by having the director himself, and the key actors from his *Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise (1984-present), menaced by the monstrous Freddy Krueger, who has escaped from his fictional universe. This metafictional approach would be echoed in fiction such as Bret Easton Ellis's

Lunar Park (2005), where the author is troubled by the rumoured presence of his own serial killer creation Patrick Bateman in the neighbourhood, having seemingly left the pages of his novel *American Psycho* (1991). Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000) takes the postmodern turn in horror to its logical conclusions by containing a deeply layered narrative framework, copious footnotes that spill across multiple pages, and fictional interviews with everyone from horror authors like Stephen King and Anne Rice to literary critic and custodian of the cultural canon, Harold Bloom. Danielewski's text serves to anticipate and even forestall the act of literary criticism. As Bill Clough points out, 'the novel functions as a parody of the traditional scholarly edition of a text' (Clough 2019, 294). In the light of developments in the early twenty-first century this phase of horror seems somewhat indulgent, even smug, but served to complicate a previously-complacent critical relationship to the text. It is difficult, for example, to imagine now a successful reading of a horror text that simply falls back on the claims of psychoanalysis.

If horror in the 1990s had hit a peak of postmodernity in a creative sense, then critical theory and the expansion of the canon opened up new possibilities for approaching the text. The emergence of Gothic Studies as a discipline is intertwined with these developments. Gothic Studies grew out of a number of critical forerunners, but coalesced in the work of a group of academics including David Punter, Glennis Byron, and Fred Botting, who used the springboard of the Gothic novel as a way of expanding the scope of the Gothic and its interpretive possibilities.[i] As Catherine Spooner points, out, one of the key elements of this was 'to loosen Gothic from the straitjacketing notion of genre […] reconfiguring Gothic as a mode' (Spooner 2021, 7-8). This opening-up of the Gothic led to a proliferation of new perspectives that is crucial to horror theory today. Spooner acknowledge the possibilities and limitations of this approach:

> The advantage and the problem with the shifting critical understanding of Gothic as a mode, discursive site or aesthetic is that it meant that almost anything could be defined as Gothic […] At best, this produced exciting new combinations of Gothic and theory – Queer Gothic, Ecogothic – but this could also dwindle into the endless taxonomisation of subgenres and, at worst, deliver an ever-multiplying and thus, ever-vanishing critical object (Spooner 2021, 8).

Gothic Studies takes in everything including but not limited to literature, film, television, videogames, art, fashion, music, and tourism, and is not even limited to horror. Spooner's own *Post-Millennial Gothic* (2017) focuses on the rise of 'happy Gothic', uncoupled from both the association of Gothic with horror, but also the 'anxiety' model of reading Gothic texts (the crucial importance of which will be returned to in this chapter). Spooner contends that 'Gothic' takes on new meanings in

the early years of the twenty-first century, moving from something ardently associated with subculture to something approximating a mainstream presence. Accordingly, there is a need to stop thinking about Gothic as something solely at the margins, merely indicative of things that are pushed out of mainstream culture. Spooner notes that, 'nuances are often overlooked to feed a popular conflation of Gothic/horror and social anxiety' (Spooner 2017, 14). In this model, horror fiction and film exist primarily as an expression of the repressed: appropriately, the Freudian psychoanalytic model refuses to lay down and die.

The interdisciplinary approach of Gothic Studies is inclusive of many different forms of media, but emerges from literature departments and remains anchored in this history. In an essay alluded to by Spooner, Chris Baldick and Robert Mighall attack the 'anxiety' model of Gothic theory by critiquing its supposed claims to radical transformation. Rather than revealing much about the subtext of such narratives, they claim, Gothic criticism tends to pat itself on the back by pointing out the foibles of, for example, the repressed Victorians: a move that reinforces the spurious notion that we (specifically academics in the humanities) are progressive and liberated. They claim that 'it stands as a central, if more colourfully flagrant, instance of the mainstream modernist, postmodernist, and left-formalist campaign against nineteenth-century literary realism and its alleged ideological backwardness' (Baldick & Mighall 2000, 210). Baldick and Mighall's criticism here is loaded with specific references to a certain tendency in literary studies and specifically the self-congratulatory nature of postmodern critique. Like Gelder's piece earlier, this essay emerges in 2000, and further signals a turn in Gothic and horror criticism away from complacency and towards a wider world. As they do well to point out, though, Gothic studies does not occur in a vacuum, and follows the same trends seen in literary criticism more widely. It is instructive too, to look outside this specific field and to examine the convergent evolution of film studies in particular.

Film studies has long considered the Gothic to be primarily an aesthetic mode, and instead has focused on the term 'horror' as a marker of genre. Nonetheless, the concerns of horror film scholars align closely with the Gothic studies approaches outlined here. As Xavier Aldana Reyes points out, 'the once-neglected history of Horror has, in the twenty-first century, been consistently explored and recast' (Aldana Reyes 2016, 3). Like the Gothic, the vaguely disreputable nature of horror film has affected how it is viewed through an academic lens. Rather than starting from a neutral position, horror is almost always approached in terms of its social function and a certain amount of restating its importance is generally necessary. Bryan Turnock, for example, in *Studying Horror Cinema* (2019),

borrows from the now-established field of Gothic criticism to associate the themes and narratives of horror cinema with 'early-to-mid eighteenth-century Britain and the works of the so-called "graveyard poets"' (Turnock 2019, 10) and the associated Gothic novels of the late eighteenth century. The motifs of death, ghosts, ruins, established in the Gothic are later joined by a focus on psychology, particularly as seen in American authors like Edgar Allan Poe, and all feed into a genre that would come to be fully established in film towards the middle of the twentieth century. Like the Gothic, horror film has very much been interpreted as indicative of social mores at the time of each individual production. As Turnock notes, the dominant approach to studying horror, 'illuminates broader social, political and cultural histories' (Turnock 2019, 13). This is all well and good, but when horror is viewed, as it often has been, as subcultural, then the reading is skewed by other factors. As Baldick and Mighall point out, 'since Gothic horror fiction has a *generic obligation* to evoke or produce fear, it is in principle the *least* reliable index of supposedly "widespread" anxieties' (Baldick & Mighall 2000, 222). This critique has not necessarily changed the way that horror criticism operates: the loose framework of the 'anxiety' model is still commonplace well into the twenty-first century. Where there is hope of progress in this regard is probably in an increased attention to the specifics of history and the operations of power. The increasing diversity of horror authors and creators has also helped to avoid the kind of critical complacency that Baldick and Mighall warn of.

Horror Theory in the Twenty-First Century

Although horror film maintains the 'generic obligation' of causing fear pointed out here, it is worth noting the shift in position of horror in the twenty-first century. As Turnock points out, horror has become increasingly mainstream. This has been demonstrated by the huge box-office success of films like *It* (2017): a big-budget adaptation of Stephen King's 1986 horror novel that Turnock uses as a case study. Although the apparent crossing-over of horror into the mainstream inspired a slew of newspaper headlines, Turnock argues that, 'in reality the genre's popularity had been growing steadily for a decade or more, fuelled by commercial and technological changes across the entire industry' (266). Larger changes that affect the consumption of horror include online distribution and unexpected sources such as social media: Turnock points to the case of the 2014 film *The Babadook* when post-release, 'the title character became the subject of an Internet meme that bizarrely elevated it to the status of gay icon' (290). Turnock sees this as symptomatic of wider forces, demonstrating, 'the genre's ability to cross cultural boundaries and capture the imagination of non-traditional audiences, while at the same time delivering a well-made scary movie' (291). Audience is crucial here, and the ways that horror is received and transformed through this actively-engaged

relationship with the genre necessarily changes the way we should examine it. This has much in common with Spooner's observations on the Gothic, which also demonstrate that academic study itself has moved the Gothic towards something approaching respectability, as can be seen by the popularity of Gothic studies in English literature departments. Spooner documents the tensions between a rebellious subculture and the establishment, questioning 'what happens when Goth images or aesthetics enter the mainstream, or are appropriated by cultural producers and audiences who are not current participants in the subculture' (Spooner 2017, 21). Spooner answers this question by claiming that, 'just because something an image is appropriated by what, for want of a better term, I shall call the mainstream does not mean that it stops signifying' (21). If anything, in the twenty-first century, the signifying potential of Gothic and horror has increased exponentially. In addition to the collapse of the high/low cultural binary characteristic of postmodernism, there has been an additional collapse of a firm distinction between the subcultural and mainstream.[ii]

At this point it is important to distinguish between Gothic and horror in the scope of this discussion. The entangled history of the two modes mean that Gothic criticism is useful in approaching horror. Clearly, though, Gothic aesthetics, mood, and narrative templates are not necessary to horror as such, particularly when thinking outside of the literary. Spooner's arguments make clear the possibility of such as separation with the rise of 'happy Gothic'. It is more difficult to imagine such a thing as happy *horror*, with the aforementioned need to create fear being a generic prerequisite. Accordingly, horror theory has moved to an increased consideration of how audiences actually consume horror, and to the mental and biological affect of horror itself. As Aldana Reyes' pointedly claims, 'horror films *do things*[iii] to viewers and their bodies' (Aldana Reyes 2016, 5). This experience is desirable and even pleasurable for viewers: a seemingly obvious point that has been hugely overlooked by critics. Aldana Reyes notes that, 'while socio-political readings of Horror are necessary, they hardly even cover the experiential side of Horror' (134). This aspect, for many viewers, 'may be more consciously present in the decision of watching a film in the first place' (134). Horror, for Aldana Reyes, is 'underlined by the emotional state of being under threat at a fictional remove' (100). This is crucial, and goes some way to explaining the appeal of horror, even while it exists alongside a reluctance. Mathias Clasen's work on the biological and evolutionary components of horror has seen the establishment of the Recreational Fear Lab at Aarhus University, Denmark, in 2020, and the publication of wide-reaching research that bridges the academic and general readership.[iv] The importance of such work is that it takes assumptions and truisms such as the idea that horror fans are thrill seekers in general, and conducts empirical research to establish firm findings. This movement away from purely 'theoretical and interpretative work' (Clasen 2021, x)

towards a quantitative and also socially-engaged method, is one major thread of the evolution of horror research in recent years, and a response to the challenge posed by Gelder in 2000.

The claims put forward by Clasen echo the work on affect highlighted by Aldana Reyes. An understanding of evolved human nature, of our physical identity as 'an anxious hairless ape' (Clasen 2021, ix), provide insight into the functions and even tropes of horror. For example, claims that 'many horror monsters are exaggerations of ancestral predators' (Clasen 2018, 358) or that they exhibit antisocial behaviours that have consistently been proscribed in human societies (359), really do provide insight into how horror interacts with what Clasen calls our 'evolved cognitive tendencies' (359). Importantly, this work emerges from a perspective beginning with passionate engagement and a real appreciation for horror, avoiding reductive or dismissive readings. A wider, and partly internet-driven, expansion of fandom and interactions between fans (including researchers) has meant that a consideration of who is actually watching, reading, or playing horror is not easily dismissed by academics. As Aldana Reyes claims of his 'affective-corporeal approach' (Aldana Reyes 2016, 133), this allows an expansion, rather than a contraction: away from 'an excessive focus on representation' (132) and towards 'a more intuitive way of finding value in Horror that proposing apposite readings about its transgressive qualities that, at times, depend on points of reference viewers might not share' (133-134). What brings these approaches together is an acknowledgement of the futility of producing a single, totalizing reading. Instead, multiple interpretive possibilities come together under the aegis of highly specific case studies. Linnie Blake, using the lens of trauma, gives an example of how this might work. In a nod to classic horror theory such as Julia Kristeva's interpretation of psychoanalysis, Blake argues that, 'the narrative of the decomposing corpse as object of erotic attachment can be seen to take on a particular significance once located within the broader context of a wounded post-war Germany […] fulfilling a specific socio-cultural function' (Blake 2008, 188). Such approaches allow for an integration of the New Historicist impulse to deny eternal, fixed meanings in favour of the specific, but also to integrate post-Freudian ideas such as trauma theory.

Trauma, at both a personal and collective level, has emerged as a trope that captures the mood of the early twenty-first century and lends itself overtly to reading the themes of horror. In the wake of the 2020 global SARS-CoV-2 pandemic this shows few signs of changing. As discussed earlier, Freudian psychoanalytic ideas became so entangled with horror and the Gothic in the twentieth century that it was impossible to separate the text itself from its interpretative meanings. Roger

Luckhurst points to something of a crisis in the humanities in the 1980s and 1990s over the legacy of Freud, when a kind of collective hysteria deriving from Recovered Memory Therapy saw accusations of ritual Satanic child murder on a mass scale in the United States. A sober reflection on what actually happened suggests, as Luckhurst notes, that, 'traumatic memory might be iatrogenic, the product of the very therapy used to treat it (Luckhurst 2013, 12). Luckhurst's work does not seek to diminish the very real experiences of those suffering from responses to trauma, but to argue that, 'it is valuable to be made aware that psychiatric discourse assumes a *plurality* of possible responses to traumatic impacts' (211). An example he uses is that of the July 7th bombings in London in 2005, where 'thousands of people on the tube system that day met the criteria of experiencing an extreme stressor event, yet diagnoses of PTSD fell vastly below usual statistical extrapolations' (211). This observable plurality of responses is in contrast to claims made in the humanities, particularly literary and film studies as discussed here, that often assume a set response to trauma, itself a Gothic narrative of haunting more than a claim to truth. If such a plurality is possible, then how can we read a text from another culture with any certainty of accurate interpretation? A possible answer is through the highly-specific attention to historical, social, and political detail proposed by Blake, and one that is also charted empirically by Clasen's work on audiences. Clasen points out that 'horror movies are always enmeshed in, and a product of, the cultural context' (Clasen 2021, 130). While this does mean that they 'are good at mirroring widespread anxieties and concerns' (130), they are also bound up in other factors such as technological changes and business models of distributors, all of which are not extraneous to how we can and should interpret an individual horror text. Clasen uses the word 'enmeshed': a term that will is also relevant in ecological readings, as discussed later, but this concept is also related to the work of Bruno Latour, whose ideas will be discussed in more detail later. Luckhurst invokes Latour's ideas by contending that, 'rival theories proliferate around the notion of trauma because it is one of these "tangled objects" whose enigmatic causation and strange effects that bridge the mental and the physical, the individual and collective, and use in many diverse disciplinary languages consequently provoke perplexed, contentious debate' (15). All this means that the position of horror theory in the early twenty-first century is one where a much wider nexus of connected ideas is acknowledged in all of their contradictions and paradoxes.

An area of urgent critical concern, and certainly horror, is the question of the environment. This is also an area where theory has 'proliferated' in an attempt to grapple with a very real problem that is simultaneously immediate and on a scale that is difficult for our minds to grasp. Human evolution has simply not prepared us to tackle global warming, the extinction of species, and our part in this at the level of humanity taken as a whole. Ecological theorist Timothy Morton sums up a certain critical

reticence by pointing out that, 'thinking outside the Neolithic box would involve seeing and talking at a magnitude we humans find embarrassing or ridiculous or politically suspect' (Morton 2016, 27). Morton calls problems at this magnitude 'hyperobjects' because although things like global warming exist, they are the result of large-scale interactions between billions of human beings and their activities, and feel instinctually removed from our individual actions and desires. Nonetheless, in what many such thinkers call the Anthropocene, an era defined by human impact on the planet, we are the monster of the story. A novel like Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) and its film adaptation (2009), portrays future environmental collapse by zooming in on a father and son's experience of such a world, and borrowing heavily from the lexicon of horror. A television show such as *The Walking Dead* (2010-2022), ostensibly a zombie horror narrative, emphasizes attempts to rebuild human social structures with a heavy focus on agriculture. The 'walkers' of the show and the cause of their resurrection might be said to be a hyperobject in Morton's terms, and through this, it becomes clear why critics like Morton (who began his research career writing on Romantic ecologies) have turned to horror, and particularly the weird, to illustrate their points and to show what horror texts themselves are capable of illuminating about the human condition. The horrific sublimity of beings such as H.P. Lovecraft's pantheon of deities like Cthulhu equate to Morton's concept of the hyperobject. Beyond even this, with specific reference to climate change and species extinction, is the realization that we are part of this monstrosity even if we experience our individual lives on a different scale. Weird fiction can function as a means by which this disjunction is revealed. As Morton writes, 'even when I am fully aware of what I am doing, myself as a member of the human species is doing something I am not intending at all and couldn't accomplish solo even if I wished it' (20). This sense of the larger scale, wrapped up in narratives of forbidden knowledge and magical realms beyond, for example in Lovecraft or in the world of *The Evil Dead* (1982-), reflects back on the human subject.

In the connected field of Object-Orientated Ontology (OOO), a theorist like Graham Harman sees horror fiction, again focusing on the weird, as a crucial intervention in philosophy. He writes of Lovecraft that, 'no other writer is so perplexed by the gap between objects and the power of language to describe them, or between objects and the qualities they possess' (Harman 2012, 3). This 'philosophical turn' in horror theory, as we might characterize it, serves to refocus horror criticism away from tired psychoanalytic models as well as the excesses of postmodernism. Using Paul Tremblay's novel *A Head Full of Ghosts* (2015) as an example, Lyle Enright points to the future of 'horror after theory', claiming that in the novel, 'the power of the unknown regains its ability to frighten from a space outside explanation or symbolism' (Enright, 2018, 507). It is through an appeal

to thinkers slightly tangential to horror criticism like Harman, Morton, and others such as Latour, that horror theory is finding an escape from the haunted house of psychoanalysis and the self-referential loop of postmodernism. Latour's writing, and the wider concept of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) in particular, have become useful in horror criticism to explore and articulate the enmeshed nature of humans and non-human actors. ANT, as Jonathan Murdoch writes, 'stresses how social and natural entities come into being as a result of the complex relations (or networks) that link them together' (Murdoch 2001, 114). What these ideas do in practical terms is to allow a reexamination of the ways in which what we call 'nature' has been depicted in horror fiction. Clasen's earlier point about how evolutionary factors have shaped what we fear can also be applied to the natural world, which has appeared as a force of horror in the form of terrifying animals, natural disasters and even killer vegetation. This demonizing of the natural world, what Simon C. Estok terms 'ecophobia' (Estok 2018), is not solely responsible for environmental destruction, but can be seen as part of a wider network of connections through the work of the theorists discussed here. Horror criticism then comes to the fore as part of a network of resistance and takes on new practical significance. As editors Elizabeth Parker and Michelle Poland write in the first issue of *Gothic Nature*, 'nature in the Gothic is so effectively uncanny because it is known and unknown all at once – strangely made visible in these stories in a way that often challenges our foolish sense of human self-enclosure' (Parker & Poland 2019, 12). The rise of ecogothic criticism has huge implications for the focus of horror theory and what is actually does. Like ecocriticism more widely, it allows for an engaged and practical purpose, exposing instances of ecophobia but pointing to the possibilities of a more enmeshed and connected view of humans and the non-human. Donna Haraway has proposed the need for a 'Cthuluscene' (Haraway 2016, 101) in response to the challenges of the Anthropocene. Here, we would embrace what has previously been approached, at times, with horror: our interconnected 'tentacular' relations with the natural world. Andrew Smith and William Hughes, in their landmark collection on the ecogothic, claims that,' the Gothic seems to be the form which is well placed to capture these anxieties [climate change and environmental damage] and provides a culturally significant point of contact between literary criticism, ecocritical theory and political process (Smith & Hughes 2013, 5).

An examination of what is 'natural' is an inherent quality in horror's depiction of monstrosity, and as Smith and Hughes note, this, 'representation of "Evil" can be used for radical or reactionary ends' (2). This question of representation comes to the fore in early twenty-first century horror criticism when thinking also about the representation of race and of LGBTQ+ identities, where non-white, gay, and trans characters have often been sidelined or coded as the monsters. This is partly a

consequence, too, of the historic lack of creative diversity in horror. In her work on African American representation in horror, Robin R. Means Coleman notes 'how the genre "speaks" difference. That is, marking Black people and culture as Other – apart from dominant (White) populations and cultures in the US (Coleman 2011, 2). Similarly, Tabish Khair sees this as a global process, claiming that, 'the Other – Gothic, gendered, imperial, colonial or racial – remains a key concern of not only Gothic fiction but also postcolonialism (Khair 2009, 10.) A renowned critical focus on race and representation has been spurred on by movement such as Black Lives Matter and an impetus to decolonize the academy, but also specifically in horror by a wave of non-white creators using horror in new and provocative ways. Sherie-Marie Harrison identifies a 'new black gothic' (Harrison 2018) in the work of filmmakers like Jordan Peele, whose film *Get Out* (2017) both works within and subverts American horror film tropes. Horror and Gothic frameworks have allowed Remi Weekes to examine the experience of asylum seekers in the UK in *His House* (2020), Ahmed Saadawi to explore the legacy of the invasion of Iraq in *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2014), and Steven Graham Jones to centre previously-Othered Native American characters in *The Only Good Indians* (2020). This all feeds back into horror criticism, which is increasingly questioning its own assumptions. Indeed, a special edition of *Gothic Studies* in Autumn 2022 is dedicated to 'decolonising the Gothic'. As with ecocriticism, this is very much overdue.

In a broad sense, horror theory is moving in line with other forms of critique in the humanities in expanding the range of perspectives and possible avenues of exploration in approaching a text. This involves both an awareness of wider factors such as audience reception and the material conditions of the production of the text, which might involve things such as race, gender, and sexual orientation of the creator. If Barthes signaled the death of the author in 1967 then they have now, appropriately, risen from the grave. Technology and the increasing ability of horror fans to communicate and form networks has meant that fandom is now a crucial part of the text itself. Horror, like other genres, now responds to and preempts fan expectations on a scale far beyond previous generations. The 1980s and 90s idea of queering the text, as in exploring the gay subtext of a novel like Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), is somewhat old hat compared to the layers of meaning surrounding *The Babadook*, mentioned earlier. Such readings can take into account fandom, social media studies, and meme culture alongside queer theory and textual analysis. Postmodernism has evolved into something taken for granted, as seen in the proliferation of mash-ups and intertextual references that characterize many horror texts.[v] Horror theory at the cutting edge is fully embracing the critique of power structures inherent to social justice movements, while steering a path away from the binary political readings of the past. Affect theory,

cognitivist and evolutionary approaches, and an awareness of the enmeshed, or networked, nature of the text in terms of society and the environment are currently driving horror theory forward. All of this is taking place in the context of the neoliberal devaluation of the humanities that horror theory critiques but is also, by necessity, finding ways to appease by bringing out the practical benefits of understanding what scares us and why.

References

Aldana Reyes, Xavier. 2016. *Horror Film and Affect: Towards a Corporeal Model of Viewership*. New York: Routledge.

Baldick, Chris, & Mighall, Robert. 2000. 'Gothic Criticism.' *A Companion to the Gothic*, edited by David Punter, 209-228. Oxford, Blackwell.

Blake, Linnie. 2008. *The Wounds of Nations: Horror Cinema, Historical Trauma and National Identity*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Bruin-Molé, Megan. 2019. *Gothic Remixed: Monster Mashups and Frankenfictions in 21st-Century Culture*. London: Bloomsbury.

Clasen, Mathias. 2018. 'Evolutionary Study of Horror Literature.' *The Palgrave Companion to Horror Literature*, edited by Kevin Corstorphine & Laura Kremmel, 355-363. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

- 2021. *A Very Nervous Person's Guide to Horror Movies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Clough, Bill. 2019. 'Scholarly Parody: Danielewski's *House of Leaves*.' *MPCA/ACA* 7, no. 2 (2019): 294-306.

Coleman, Robin R. Means. 2011. *Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present*. New York: Routledge.

Enright, Lyle. 2018. 'Horror "After Theory"'. *The Palgrave Companion to Horror Literature*, edited by Kevin Corstorphine & Laura Kremmel, 499-510. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Estok, Simon C. 2018. *The Ecophobia Hypothesis*. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

Gelder, Ken (ed). 2000. *The Horror Reader*. London: Routledge.

Harman, Graham. 2011. *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy*. London: Zero Books.

Haraway, Donna. 2016. *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press.

Harrison, Sherie-Marie. 2018. 'New Black Gothic'. *Los Angeles Review of Books*. https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/new-black-gothic/.

Khair, Tabish. *The Gothic, Postcolonialism and Otherness: Ghosts from Elsewhere*. London & New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Luckhurst, Roger. 2013. *The Trauma Question*. London: Routledge.

Mendible, Myra. 1999. 'High Theory/Low Culture: Postmodernism and the Politics of Carnival.' *American Culture* 22, no. 2 (Summer): 71-76.

Morton, Timothy. 2016. *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Murdoch, Jonathan. 2001. 'Ecologising Sociology: Actor-Network Theory, Co-construction and the Problem of Human Exemptionalism'. *Sociology* 35, no. 1 (February 2001): 111-133.

Parker, Elizabeth, and Poland, Michelle. 2019. '*Gothic Nature*: An Introduction'. *Gothic Nature*, no. 1 (2019), 1-20.

Royle, Nicholas. 2003. *The Uncanny: An Introduction*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Smith, Andrew, & Hughes, William. 2013. *Ecogothic*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Spooner, Catherine. 2017. *Post-Millennial Gothic: Comedy, Romance, and the Rise of Happy Gothic*. London: Bloomsbury.

- 2021. 'Introduction: A History of Gothic in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries.' *The Cambridge History of the Gothic*, Volume III: Gothic in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries, edited by Catherine Spooner and Dale Townshend, 1-21. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Turnock, Bryan. 2019. *Studying Horror Cinema*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

---

[i] For a full account of this history, see Spooner, 2021.
[ii] We might look to the massive success of the Marvel Cinematic Universe and in particular the multi-billion-dollar monetization of what might have recently been seen as marginal 'geek culture', including the pushing of previously-obscure characters into the mainstream.
[iii] My emphasis.
[iv] See Clasen, 2021.
[v] See Bruin-Molé, 2019.