GENDER AND CONTEMPORARY HORROR IN COMICS, GAMES AND TRANSMEDIA

EMERALD STUDIES IN POPULAR CULTURE AND GENDER

Series Editor: Samantha Holland, Leeds Beckett University, UK

As we re-imagine and re-boot at an ever faster pace, this series explores the different strands of contemporary culture and gender. Looking across cinema, television, graphic novels, fashion studies and reality TV, the series asks: what has changed for gender? And, perhaps more seriously, what has not? Have representations of genders changed? How much does the concept of 'gender' in popular culture define and limit us?

We not only consume cultural texts, but share them more than ever before; meanings and messages reach more people and perpetuate more understandings (and misunderstandings) than at any time in history. This new series interrogates whether feminism has challenged or change misogynist attitudes in popular culture.

Emerald Studies in Popular Culture and Gender provides a focus for writers and researchers interested in sociological and cultural research that expands our understanding of the ontological status of gender, popular culture and related discourses, objects and practices.

Titles in this series

Samantha Holland, Robert Shail and Steven Gerrard (eds), *Gender and Contemporary Horror in Film*

Steven Gerrard, Samantha Holland and Robert Shail (eds), *Gender and Contemporary Horror in Television*

Robert Shail, Steven Gerrard and Samantha Holland (eds), *Gender and Contemporary Horror in Comics, Games and Transmedia*

Samantha Holland, *Screen Heroines, Superheroines, Feminism and Popular Culture*

GENDER AND CONTEMPORARY HORROR IN COMICS, GAMES AND TRANSMEDIA

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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Introduction

Robert Shail

This volume forms the third instalment of an informal series published by Emerald and edited by Samantha Holland, Shail, and Gerrard (2019). The previous volumes focussed on gender and horror in television and in film. The academic study of horror as a distinctive genre can be traced back to such key works as David Punter's landmark *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day* (1996), which focused on literary traditions and the origins of the genre within Gothic fiction. Punter successfully described many of the central attributes of horror, from the use of distinctive settings through the appearance of stock characters, to recurrent themes such as the notion of the monstrous or the seductive depiction of evil. Horror in cinema has also been the subject of intensive scrutiny over a number of years, from comprehensive overviews (Cherry, 2009; Jancovich, 2001) to specific studies of key elements such as gender (Clover, 2015; Grant, 2015). Discussions of horror cinema have frequently drawn on analytical strategies which find their roots in psychoanalytic methods, particularly Freud (Creed, 1993), or which show the influence of Julia Kristeva's work on abjection (1982). The focus here has often been on the manner in which the horror genre can play out, in the most fantastic forms, expressions of patriarchal repression and violence or, less commonly, how to facilitate resistance to this dominant mode. With women so often cast as either the victims or as the cause of horror, violence and abjection, the genre has provoked considerable concern and debate over the way audiences might identify with and seek pleasure in its products.

The inclusion in this series of a volume on horror cinema is testament to the continuing appeal and relevance of the genre, but the commissioning of a second volume on horror in television recognises the considerable recent success of horror in crossing over to the 'small' screen. This has been bolstered by the commitment of new channels such as Netflix and HBO to the genre and is reflected in output as varied as *Carnivale* (HBO, 2003–2005) and *Hannibal* (NBC, 2013–2015), as well as British productions like *Afterlife* (ITV, 2005–2006) and *Psychoville* (BBC, 2009–2011); this popularity has inevitably spread to web-based outlets with series such as *Lore* (Amazon, 2017–). It can be argued that

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television has appropriated, and largely maintained, the tropes of film horror, along with its visual style, while adapting it to a long form and building a new audience whose attachment to multiple narrative threads and multiple character arcs has obvious links to other popular television forms such as soap opera or the situation comedy.

This resurgence, or at least continuation, in the popularity of horror, evidence perhaps to the endless need to express our anxieties in the face of contemporary terrors, has seen a plethora of work in other formats. Alongside literature, film and television, we can now find horror in the visual form of sequential art; comic books have sought to exploit the audience appeal of the genre from at least the 1950s, when the publications of EC Comics such as *Tales from the Crypt* and *Vault of Horror* revitalised the short story form originated by Edgar Allan Poe and continued by H. P. Lovecraft, provoking the outrage of middle America and the moral censors. More recently, the critically esteemed development of the graphic novel has added cultural prestige to the form, as well as allowing complex explorations of its key themes. Critical work by the likes of Paul Gravett (2005) on the graphic novel has given due consideration to works like Charles Burns' *Black Hole* (2005). If comic versions of the genre often took cinema as an inspiration for their style and content, the link is even stronger with video games, which often built on existing franchises such as those for *Resident Evil* or *Silent Hill*. While much scholarship on video games has focussed on the application of ludic theory, little to date has looked at the genre with an emphasis on narrative, character, setting and audience identification (Perron, 2009), something which this volume sets out to rectify. Work on audio versions of the genre remain rare indeed, another omission addressed here.

Horror has even spread its tentacles into the postmodern world of transmedia. It is worth reminding ourselves of Henry Jenkins' original definitions of the word in his ground-breaking study *Convergence Culture* (2008). Jenkins was keen to point out that this new form could be defined both in terms of its patterns of production – such as the franchising of a set of characters and story arcs across a range of media platforms – and the new narrative modes that it offered, with an emphasis on multiple perspectives and interaction with audiences. A substantial part of this volume is given over to considerations of these two lines of enquiry, with one set of chapters looking at the migration of the genre from one form to another, while a second set of essays considers the new ways in which such mediation can invite the participation of audiences and fans. This potential democratisation of the genre has become as contested as any of its other manifestations, not least in relation to gender.

This collection opens with two essays which consider horror in the graphic novel format. Matt Linton reaffirms the reliance of horror comics on cinema by considering the influence of Brian De Palma's *Carrie* (1976) on female stereotypes which persist into the comic form in the 'Dark Phoenix Saga' franchise. His essay also mines a concern which is present in much of the writing in this volume: can new forms of horror facilitate voices which contradict and subvert its normative reliance on gender stereotypes and the perpetuation of patriarchal

values. In Robert Shail's essay on *Black Hole* and the classic manga *Uzumaki*, the relationship is with the specifics of body horror and the work of film directors such as David Cronenberg, David Lynch and John Carpenter. Here anxieties about gendered bodies intersect with contemporary concerns about nuclear war or environmental damage. The horror genre has always been a potent means of reflecting fears.

The second section considers horror in video games. Rebecca Jones' analysis of the female protagonists in both *Tomb Rider* and *The Last of Us* examines classic feminist arguments in relation to the objectification of female figures in a male-dominated format, searching for new variations that offer more positive levels of identification. Merlin Seller, in 'Horrific Things: *Alien Isolation* and the Queer Materiality of Gender, Desire and Being' evaluates the possibility of moving beyond binaries of gender identification in gaming, a theme which recurs in a number of other essays in this collection. Tiago Monteiro shifts the focus onto masculinity in horror-related games, as do Michael Fuchs and Klaus Rieser in the final chapter of this section, finding both the persistence of heterogenous male stereotypes and their undoing, a process facilitated by the extremes of the genre. In all of these essays, the nature of identification becomes as problematic as identity itself.

Transmedia comes to the fore in the third section, blurring the boundaries between different media platforms. In Steven Gerrard's chapter on adaptations of H. P. Lovecraft, we see Henry Jenkins' definition of transmedia in action, as Lovecraft's originals are reinvented across film, radio, graphic novels, games and other media formats. Here the avoidance of gender as an issue becomes revealing in itself, as the recurring figure of victimised males is used to express underlying anxieties that seem surprisingly contemporary. The blurring of boundaries between fiction and reality is at the heart of Linda McCarthy and Richard Sheppard's examination of a number of representations of the author Mary Shelley. While focusing on film, the chapter touches on issues in adaptation from one mode to another, as well as examining familiar discourses of patriarchal ideology. In a similar manner, Kathryn Hemmann's 'Illusion, Reality, and Fearsome Femininity in Takashi Miike's *Audition*' examines this film in relation to the wider Japanese culture which produced it, particularly sources in manga, demonstrating the typical interconnected narratives which Jenkins refers to in his work. Again, attempts to subvert patriarchal discourses seem to inevitably come undone as they operate within underlying ideologies which make such subversion difficult or impossible. Finally, Kelly Doyle considers the various interlocking narrative worlds of the *World War Z* franchise and finds, more positively, the persistence of opportunities offered by the horror genre to unpick dominant gender values. As in the previous two chapters, there is a constant ebb and flow here between the perpetuation of normative gender representation and their undoing which carries over from literature, film and television.

If section three is concerned with adaptation, in its widest sense, the fourth section focuses on the role afforded to audiences and fans by contemporary transmedia. Janelle Vermaak's analysis of the *Alien* film franchise considers the role of fans in creating the very notion of what constitutes genre, whereas

Rosanna Vivar gives a first-hand anthropological account of the performative nature of fandom at the San Sebastian Horror and Film Festival. Here the clash between dominant patriarchal discourses and the resistance of female horror fans finds a very public dynamic as those same female fans attempt to disrupt from within, raising questions over whether such a process of participation ultimately negates their attempts to subvert male dominance. Charlotte Baker's final essay looks at female fan-made slash fiction and art created in response to the *Hannibal* franchise and considers how the appropriation of media by fans can empower them to express their own, complex identities.

The final section contains two essays addressing one of the most neglected media forms: audio. Although touched on briefly in Gerrard's essay, both Richard Hand and Alison Bainbridge consider the imaginative power of an imageless medium, whether in the form of traditional radio broadcasts or contemporary online podcasts. Both essays share a concern with the audience and their immersion in this format, an arena where intense identification becomes possible. Again, the tension between heteronormative narratives and the possibility of subversion, such as in the queer masculinities of the *Welcome to Night Vale* podcast, are central.

Throughout these essays we see the continuing centrality of gender to the horror genre, whatever media format is used. We also see how the definitions of media platforms themselves have become increasingly blurred or, in Henry Jenkins' terms, converged. The tension here is often between the commercial driver of franchises seeking multiple outlets for familiar products and the contrary possibility that transmedia offers to break down the walls of expectation. Just as the tropes of horror seem to persist whatever the media format, so do the key questions brought up by representations of gender seem too often to remain the same. How much is the horror genre still reliant on gender stereotyping and playing out of normative gender roles? Or does the postmodern turn allow the genre to increasingly question these gender values, expose the anxieties it creates and even offer alternatives? Most strikingly, as suggested by a number of writers, are we moving beyond gender binaries into whole new areas of multi-gendered, or even non-gendered, identification?

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PART I
COMICS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS