

The Myth of Harm: Horror, Censorship and the Child by Sarah Cleary, Bloomsbury Academic, 2022, 296 pp., \$150 USD (h/c)

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Volume 6, numéro 1, juin 2023

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1101403ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1101403ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Montréal Monstrum Society

ISSN

2561-5629 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Giannini, E. (2023). Compte rendu de [*The Myth of Harm: Horror, Censorship and the Child* by Sarah Cleary, Bloomsbury Academic, 2022, 296 pp., \$150 USD (h/c)]. *Monstrum*, 6(1), 230–233. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1101403ar>

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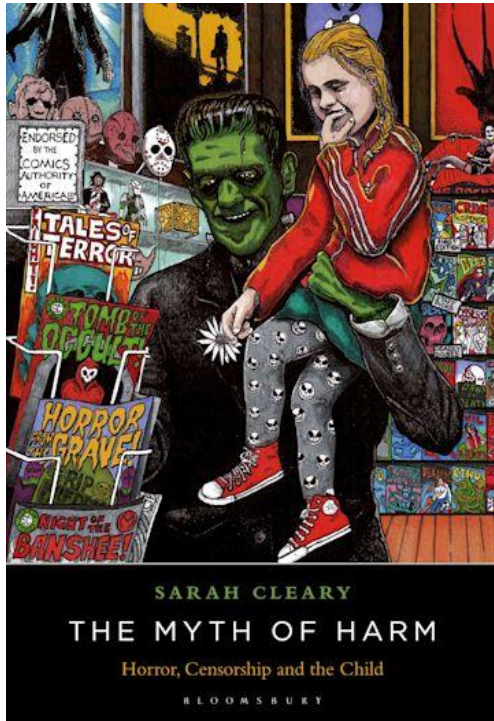
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BOOK REVIEW

The Myth of Harm: Horror, Censorship and the Child

By Sarah Cleary
Bloomsbury Academic
2022

296 pp., \$150 USD (h/c)

No matter what generation, there is likely a particular moral panic that defined—and possibly circumscribed—one’s childhood. Video games in the 1990s, the Satanic Panic 1980s, or the furor over horror comics in the 1950s—each offered concerned parents or civic leaders wringing their hands on the

newspaper’s front page or as a talking head on cable news networks. If said panic goes far enough into the social consciousness, it may warrant a Senate Subcommittee, pressure on various industries, and either the material being banned or, at “best,” slapped with warning labels that can be easily ignored by purchasers. While none of these “solutions” seemed to enact much lasting or credible change, the one trait all shared, as Sarah Cleary elucidates in this in this compelling study, is invoking the “myth of harm.” That is, the idea of “art as a corruptive form of imitation and influence” (2) aimed at young and/or vulnerable populations. Using narrative analysis and an abundance of historical research, Cleary examines the persistence of this “myth of harm” from the pre-Hays code films of the 1930s to the furor over video games in the late 1990s and beyond, ending with a case study of the so-called “Slenderman” murder in 2014, as these harm narratives gained new footing and proliferation on the Internet.

As an academic, an industry professional, and a horror fan, Cleary seems well-positioned to address this issue. She writes with knowledge and authority on the material in question, harnessing a fan’s knowledge, particularly in the discussion of film, to trace the ways in which horror media have served as scapegoats in depressingly similar ways across the decades, and to highlight the way in which the Gothic is descriptive of both the texts themselves and the

narratives of harm built around them. That is, “both the narratives of harm and the mechanisms in which these narratives are told equally invoke the monstrous tale that somehow horror fiction is capable of harming children” (21), using the same images and narratives of the horror stories to scare parents, educators, and legislators. Starting with the Depression-era films of the 1930s, Cleary seeks to puncture this myth of harm—and the problematic discipline of media effects research (the idea that viewer/reader consumption of violent or coarse images, words, or actions lead to violence in their consumers)—in a variety of ways. Rather than Cleary’s textual analyses, it is secondary material (newspaper columns, psychological research) that provides the through-line of this book. This includes the various reports from multiple disciplines (psychology, sociology, media effects) that have sought to “prove” harm, most of which conclude, despite their own findings, that the potential is there and preventative action necessary. While the final chapter of the book is dedicated to a case study of the quasi-public forum creepypasta and the Slenderman killings, Cleary weaves in various high-profile cases in the US and UK, such as the murder of three-year-old James Bulger in England or the Columbine massacre in Littleton, Colorado, viewed almost exclusively through the “effects” lens; ie, that the violence was caused by the media that the killers consumed. Cleary elucidates how these “media effects” findings are subsequently interpreted and amplified by both politicians and the media, which, at best, seek to impose moral meaning on chaotic or horrific real-world events at worst, or used by particular figures (Mary Whitehouse, the conservative crusader who spent decades fighting against what she viewed as moral and social decay in the United Kingdom perpetrated by the media, is one example Cleary invokes) to forward their own political or social ambitions through an invocation that absolves the prevailing power structure of responsibility once performative restrictions have been enacted.

Cleary’s study, however, is not merely an historical overview of these campaigns. The book asks vital questions about what—and who—these campaigns really represented and were really trying to protect. While Cleary is writing from the United Kingdom, where class dynamics are more entrenched, this history clearly shows class bias on both sides of the Atlantic, with “vulnerability” or “weak-mindedness” that would make individuals susceptible to what they view as pernicious and dangerous images tied directly into economics and education. This not only suggesting that working class or economically disadvantaged parents are unconcerned with their children’s media consumption but that these parents are equally vulnerable because they do not

share the resources or opportunities of those who purport to study, or legislate, media's effects.

Cleary also highlights the paradox these panics expose between fear *for* children and fear *of* them resting between the Romantic/Victorian view of childhood as purity and innocence and the continued recycling of the idea these same children are consuming higher quantities of violent and disturbing media than ever before. Each chapter covers a different era (1930s, 1950s etc) and the supposedly harmful media that characterized it: films, comic books, slashers. Merely by providing a timeline of these panics exposes how neither the arguments nor the view of children as both innocent and easily manipulated into violence change regardless of era. On this point, she writes: "Such protean definitions of the child who paradoxically needs protection yet still have the potential to threaten the moral fabric of society are perpetuated throughout the myth of harm as it travels from one generation to the next" (16). Essentially, Cleary argues, the blinkered view of childhood as well as the desire to blame media, and horror media in particular, can cloud the actual social and economic structures that can lead to violence, whether an individual has watched *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* or not.

Cleary's long view of the history of this myth not only offers an erudite response to the dubious nature of media effects research, but takes on a political dimension by succinctly pointing out the root of these issues: fear, particularly of change. Despite, as per example, the children/teens of the 1950s viewed as a potential delinquent for reading horror comics, as adults, they pinpointed a similar boogeyman in the slasher films their children consumed. As she writes in her conclusion: "Where fear lies, there will always be opportunists all too eager to exploit this fear" (250). While the current boogeymen in this decade's culture wars are critical race theory, drag performers, and the trans community, the rhetoric is eerily similar (if far more toxic). Her quoting of Mary Whitehouse, who sold herself as a crusader for moral order and protector of the UK's children was chilling when first uttered in 1984 and is even more so now, when she proclaimed that despite the lack of credible research on media effects, we must "get away from this silly business of having to prove things" (qtd. in Cleary 176). It is no stretch to apply this continued invocation of the myth of harm to the right-wing's vilifying rhetoric around drag story hours or the very presence of the trans community. Yet unlike comic books, "video nasties," or Internet creepypasta, it is the myth's continued persistence despite actual evidence that is what is capable of doing real harm to actual people. Cleary's precise and well-researched work does not touch on, nor can it solve

that problem; rather, it offers a template for more work in this area and serves as an accessible read for those outside academia.

— Erin Giannini

Erin Giannini, PhD, is an independent scholar. She served as an editor and contributor at PopMatters, and written numerous articles about topics from corporate culture in genre television to production-level shifts and their effects on television texts. She is also the author of *Supernatural: A History of Television's Unearthly Road Trip* (Rowman & Littlefield 2021), and *The Good Place* [TV Milestones], and co-editor of the book series B-TV: Television Under the Critical Radar for Bloomsbury.

- 2023 -

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