

Labors of Fear: The Modern Horror Film Goes to Work, Edited
by Aviva Briefel and Jason Middleton, University of Texas
Press, 2023, 256 pp., \$55 USD (h/c)

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Volume 7, Number 1, June 2024

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1112935ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1112935ar>

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Publisher(s)

Montréal Monstrum Society

ISSN

2561-5629 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Colebrook, M. (2024). Review of [*Labors of Fear: The Modern Horror Film Goes to Work*, Edited by Aviva Briefel and Jason Middleton, University of Texas Press, 2023, 256 pp., \$55 USD (h/c)]. *Monstrum*, 7(1), 85–87.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1112935ar>

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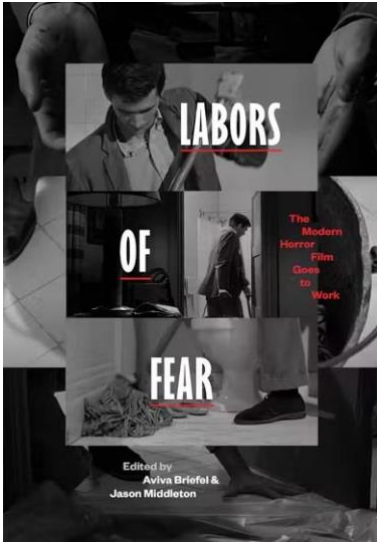
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BOOK REVIEW

Labors of Fear: The Modern Horror Film Goes to Work

Edited by Aviva Briefel and Jason Middleton
University of Texas Press
2023

256 pp., \$55 USD (h/c)

The ten essays in *Labors of Fear* constitute a robust scholarly investigation into the critique of the exigencies of work in horror cinema since the 1970s (with Hitchcock's *Psycho* [1960] noted in the Introduction as a pivotal point for such considerations). This subject is under investigation in many higher education courses and curricula, yet the collection is also, for the most part, accessible to the inquisitive layperson. The collection covers a veritable cornucopia of material, texts, and academic frameworks, a testament to the wealth of cinema that lends itself to this hitherto unexplored avenue of horror scholarship. Additionally, the thematic structure that underpins the volume, moving from how horror itself works to gradually more focused issues on the body, the domestic sphere, gender, and race, ensures a coherent series of arguments that also allows for emergent intertextualities and connections. Contributors to the volume represent a generous blend of senior scholars and researchers at the earlier parts of their career, which for this reviewer is indicative of editors who have an appreciation for the insights and innovative approaches that developing scholars can bring. Each essay engages with existing critical scholarship before expanding into its own methodology or praxis in order to engage further with the modern compendium of horror cinema and contemporary global political movements and civil unrest which have become assimilated into the horror cinema's exploration of class and labour.

The collection is organized into four parts: "Part I. How Horror Works: Killing, Dying, Surviving" features three chapters that have distinctly different approaches to their critique, from the tools of death to bodies to the work of survival more broadly. "Part II. Working from Home: Domestic, Gendered, and Emotional Labor" discusses the relationship between gender, work, and the domestic sphere with specific focus, at times, on the home as the site of Gothic disruption and irruption. "Part III. Stolen Work, Stolen Play: Race and Racialized Labor" discusses a multitude

of critical and sociological frameworks as applied to texts dealing with aspects of race and characterisation.

It is outside the scope of this review to offer a commentary on every chapter in the collection; accordingly, I consider notable highlights that are in no way meant as an implicit reflection on the quality of the works omitted from review.

Marc Olivier (Ch. 1) takes a quantitative approach to his analysis of slasher films and the proverbial tools of the serial killer's trade, listing the different objects and the frequency of their usage in delivering the terminal outcome to a victim. Further to this, Olivier expands the criteria of his census to include "kill locations and the gender, age range, social class, race or ethnicity, and sexual orientation of the aggressor and the attacked" (16). By compiling these data, Oliver creates a response to Carol Clover's pervasive theory of the Final Girl. Such is the comprehensive aggregation of information in this chapter; it's the equivalent of bringing a gun to an academic knife fight (to echo the author's own comments), and this is a memorable piece of work.

Adam Lowenstein's (Ch. 3) detailed and consummate discussion of the often-underappreciated final instalment in George Romero's *Living Dead* series weaves a complex but ultimately rewarding web of artistic connections and influences via the route of a socio-economic analysis, which informs the discussion around how zombies, rather than humans, could exist under the conditions presented in the films. Furthermore, he engages the questions around the mutual dependency between zombies and survivors, as well as the more familiar thematic discussions of the relationship between capitalism, labour, and the movement from suburban to post-industrial and post-apocalyptic communities in each of the six films in Romero's zombie series.

Lisa Coulthard's (Ch. 4) fascinating and innovative chapter considers one of Gothic Studies' more underexplored aspects: sonic Gothic. Investigating this concept through *The Babadook* (2014) and *The Swerve* (2018), Coulthard dissects the cumulative aural exhaustion in these films' depiction of the working mother. Foregrounding issues of "alienation, disorientation, and mental distress of feminized labour" (77), the essay explores and explodes the role of the caregiver or caretaker in the often-haunted home.

Aviva Briefel's (Ch. 7) discussion of Jordan Peele's *Us* (2019) and Joel Burges's (Ch. 9) analysis of *It Follows* (2014) both engage with existing paradigms and recent events, rendering texts that may not necessarily be immediately promoted to the canon as powerful examples of contemporary narrative responses and allegorical representations. In both instances, the questions around work and leisure and their status as a tool of politicization

and economic exclusion make for fascinating reading with both chapters meriting a much longer and considered analysis than the limits of this review can offer.

From serial killers to zombies, homemakers to houses of horror, this collection covers a multitude of thematic concerns and critical frameworks relating to the horrors of economic notions of labour and productivity, one of the many dark sides of the so-called American Dream, as the editors point out in their Introduction. Innovations in this respect include a focus on reproductive labour and emotional labour, as well as new formations such as the labours of social media users. *Labors of Fear* is thus not only a groundbreaking study of its own accord, but also stands as an inspiring call for further work on horror and/of labour. It is both a fascinating critical accompaniment to the films it covers, and an important standalone scholarly intervention.

— Martyn Colebrook

Dr. Martyn Colebrook is an Independent Researcher whose academic interests span contemporary British and American fiction. He has published chapters and a co-edited collection on such authors and topics as the 1990s and 2000s in contemporary literature, Don DeLillo, China Mieville, Louise Welsh and Gothic Nostalgia, Iain Banks, Paul Auster, Kevin Barry, and the Postindustrial Gothic. He is a regular book reviewer for *The Bottle Imp* journal.

- 2024 -

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