

POV Horror: The Trauma Aesthetic of the Found Footage Subgenre by Duncan Hubber, McFarland, 2023, 245 pp., \$65 USD (pbk.)

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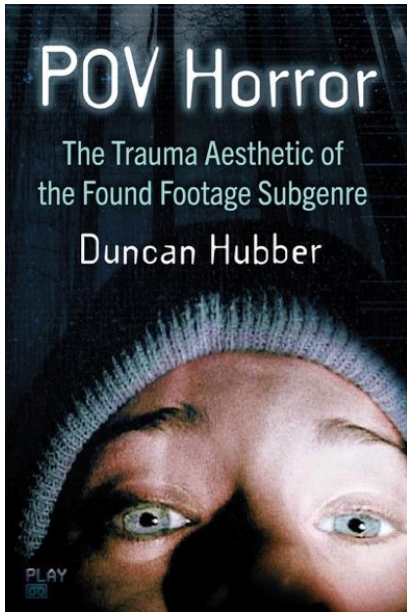
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BOOK REVIEW

POV Horror: The Trauma Aesthetic of the Found Footage Subgenre

By Duncan Hubber
McFarland
2023

245 pp., \$65 USD (pbk.)

POV Horror: The Trauma Aesthetic of the Found Footage Subgenre by Duncan Hubber is a comprehensive overview of the relatively neglected genre of found footage (FF) horror films. FF horror films are both incredibly popular with audiences and, with the exception of Alexandra Heller-Nicholas's *Found Footage Horror Films: Fear and the Appearance of Reality* (McFarland 2014), Xavier Aldana Reyes and Linnie Blake's *Digital Horror: Haunted Technologies, Network Panic and the Found Footage Phenomenon* (I.B. Tauris/Bloomsbury 2015), and Shellie McMurdo's more recent *Blood on the Lens: Trauma and Anxiety in American Found-Footage Horror Cinema* (Edinburgh 2022), largely overlooked by academic study, as Hubber points out. The author is systematic in laying out his intentions in the Introduction, presenting the films that anchor each of the five chapters in the tantalizing context of a "trauma aesthetic," which he contrasts to "the classical definition of aesthetic, which concerns beauty, flow, symmetry and harmony" (6).

In the Introduction, Hubber engages with the key text that popularized the "found footage concept" (1), *The Blair Witch Project* (1999). *Blair Witch* features an iconic direct address to the camera by documentary filmmaker Heather who takes responsibility for the horrific situation in which she and her companions now find themselves, and in doing so, according to Hubber, "evoke[s] the cognitive fissure—between comprehension and confusion, between frenzy and detachment—that characterizes the traumatized mind" (1). Hubber will go on to champion key FF films throughout the book, argue for FF Horror as a subgenre, and make the claim that these films can be understood as expressions of trauma. Hubber also presents distinct categories of FF horror—Remote, Urban, Domestic, and Perpetrator films—attributing to each a set of distinctive characteristics. To engage with the rich history of

FF horror films, Hubber focuses on case studies of representative texts from each category.

In Chapter 1, “Buried Tapes,” Hubber deploys diverse writers and texts to support his contention that POV Horror is cinematic in its visceral transmission of trauma. E. Ann Kaplan, author of *Trauma Culture* (2005), is prominent among the scholars he cites. Hubber also moves through crucial touchstones in the history of horror such as examples of the epistolary novel (*Dracula*, *Frankenstein*), Victorian post-mortem photographs, Orson Welles’s 1938 *The War of the Worlds* broadcast, and Ruggero Deodato’s 1980 *Cannibal Holocaust* in order to point out that traces and ideas of POV Horror have existed in texts prior to the 1999 release of *Blair Witch*.

In Chapter 2, “Into the Woods,” Hubber meticulously and methodically informs the reader of the themes and analytical frameworks with which he will engage. While I appreciate the attendant discussion of *Marble Hornets* and Slenderman, folklore as an underappreciated area of study, and Hubber’s recourse to pertinent sections of Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s seminal “Monster Culture (Seven Theses)” (1996), I feel that there are a few strands that would benefit from more development, or perhaps even a separate chapter, as some of the text feels perfunctory, and, despite the valiant gesture towards breadth of coverage, there is the sense that we are following too many tributaries in too many directions. However, when Hubber takes up his main thesis and describes how trauma is depicted and transmitted in films like *The Bay* (2012), *The Last Broadcast* (1998), *Lake Mungo* (2008), and *REC* (2007), he engages with diverse texts that represent different aspects of FF aesthetics in which trauma begins as a singular event that will transmit the visceral nature of wounds, both psychological and physical. Hubber cites Cathy Caruth’s 1996 idea that trauma is “the wound that cries out” (77) in discussing the American landscape as a collection of sites of historical trauma, prominent among them Wounded Knee. In *Blair Witch*, Hubber points out that the sing-screaming of the national anthem by Josh and Mike can be seen as desperation but also as sarcasm as the lofty ideals of the lyrics stand in opposition to the characters’ worsening situation.

Chapter 3, “Out of the Rubble,” deals with post-9/11 global trauma. Hubber notes the rise of amateur recordings constituting early records of events such as the World Trade Centre attacks, mass shootings, and Hurricane Katrina as possible influences on formal aspects of FF horror films. In this context, Hubber highlights *Cloverfield*’s (2008) aesthetic as visualizing the sensations of such collective traumatic experience. The camera is operated by Hud, a beginner who has had the camera thrust into his arms. Hud pans shakily,

zooms unpredictably and rewinds the tape to reveal palimpsest-video images of Beth and Rob at Coney Island. The monster in *Cloverfield*, and indeed in many FF horror films, is often furtive and rarely depicted in its entirety. Hubber's description of elusive monsters born of trauma in *Cloverfield*, *REC*, *Pandemic* (2016), and *The Bay* are examined alongside extensive renditions of the diverse settings featured in the four films.

In Chapter 4 "Always Watching," the focus is on domestic FF horror, centring on *Paranormal Activity* (2007) and *Lake Mungo*. Hubber reflects on the fact that the two films feature the use of surveillance cameras that become instruments of the "monster's" will. The discussion of trauma comes in relation to main characters Katie (*Paranormal Activity*) and Alice (*Lake Mungo*) and how each displays behaviour that can be read as examples of depersonalization, a symptom of complex-post traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD).

The fifth and final chapter features what Hubber calls perpetrator horror. The examination of *Cannibal Holocaust*, *Man Bites Dog* (1992), *Gang Tapes* (2001), and *Zero Day* (2003) leads to the elaboration of wide-ranging topics Hubber connects to the perpetrator category such as Carol J. Clover's 1992 analysis of the slasher, colonization and its traumatic repercussions and hypermasculinity. Each of the aforementioned films becomes a springboard for related topics. *Cannibal Holocaust*, for example, frames a discussion of othering, Indigenous sovereignty, and revenge, among many others. *Gang Tapes* looks at systemic racism, African American disenfranchisement and the legacy of slavery. And *Man Bites Dog* and *Zero Day* are, among other things, evocations of problematic identification with perpetrators of mass violence.

The films featured in this book have an advocate in Hubber, whose careful and consistent argument for the specificity of each kind of FF horror is discussed through the lens of trauma theory. *POV Horror* discusses formal elements in detail, focusing on the myriad types of camerawork evident in the genre from surveillance to handheld, and how these thematize and evoke the aesthetics and affects of trauma. Hubber's book complexifies FF horror, treating the films as more than a cheap, exploitative film cycle, and suggesting that the films both reverberate with traumatic events and are themselves transmitters of traumas past and present.

— Anne Golden

Anne Golden is an independent curator and writer whose programs have been presented at Musée National du Québec, Edges Festival, and Queer City Cinema, among others. She is a

member of the programming committee for the Montréal Underground Film Festival. Golden has participated in numerous panels on curatorial practices, independent distribution, and horror films. She is Artistic Director of Groupe Intervention Vidéo (GIV). She teaches in the Media Arts Department of John Abbott College. Her novel *From the Archives of Vidéo Populaire* (Pedlar Press) was released in March 2015. She is Reviews Editor for *Monstrum*. Golden has made over one hundred videos including *Les Autres* (1991), *Fat Chance* (1994), *Big Girl Town* (1998), *The Commuter* (2021), *Migraine* (2022), and *Torpor* (2023.) Golden was the recipient of the Prix Robert-Forget attributed by Vidéographe in 2022.

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