

A South Pacific horror hot take: pedagogy, media literacy and comparative horror analysis

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While publicly engaging with horror hot takes as academics might be a helpful and easy form of community outreach, reading and responding to groan-inducing knee-jerk listicles and aggro pieces of soapbox clickbait can feel a little like swatting at a mosquito: they make a disproportionate amount of noise for something so small, and they can be distracting, irritating and a cause of ongoing feverish discomfort. Nonetheless, even the worst offenders can offer excellent opportunities for engagement in and outside of the classroom. This is especially the case if we are interested in what horror says about ‘us’ – and the question of who that ‘us’ includes, and excludes, and how.

Despite, or perhaps *because* of their flippancy, ‘just add water’ hot takes offer great pedagogical opportunities through which we might teach media literacy and interrogate the nature, tenor and industrial contexts of online polemic. As with other pieces of rhetoric or cultural marginalia, we might ask students to deconstruct them as texts – to discern their strategies of persuasion, analyse their biases and blind spots, and weigh up or debate their claims. Consider a recent and extraordinarily bad take, “Stop letting your kids watch horror films” (19 November 2018)¹, first published on New Zealand pop culture, news and social issues website *The Spinoff* and then re-published through content sharing deals by a number of news agencies, including *Newshub* and *MSN*. Parenting columnist and regular media commentator Emily Writes describes how her 5-year-old son was traumatised by another child’s (potentially second- or third-hand) description of a film from the *Saw* franchise – which I think we can all agree is a horrific and thoroughly inappropriate thing for such young children to be encountering. The author implores caregivers to think about the downstream effects of their own media consumption and levels (or not) of parental lenience by arguing that ‘what you do with your kids hurts my child’. She writes, “Parents have just got to stop showing their young kids horror movies and letting them play scary games. You just have to stop it.” This plea is couched within a *mea culpa* - the author’s reflection upon some of her less than successful

¹ <https://thespinoff.co.nz/parenting/19-11-2018/stop-letting-your-kids-watch-horror-films/>

parenting decisions (read: taking her young son to AC/DC and Iron Maiden concerts). The aspect of the column that is emphasised by the piece's title is close to the platonic ideal of bad, shallow horror hot takes: that horror is bad, and that children shouldn't watch horror until they are 18.

This opinion piece is, of course, a genuinely distressed parent expressing her frustrations and upset, albeit to a wide audience of sympathetic readers, some of whom may also have bought her books.² It is also another case of a jobbing, financially precarious freelancer needing to fill space, quickly, with a subjective first-person appeal to pity (with a take-away, bite-sized call to action) that will generate enough impressions to satisfy the site's sponsors and maintain a steady output of 'relevant' and 'relatable' content. It's a thankless, soul-destroying task. But the core of this very bad take commits all manner of sins of critical thinking. It distils an incredibly varied and broad genre to a series of common go-to talking points: that horror is morally pernicious; that all horror is very scary; that all horror is violent and gory; that horror is a narrow and antisocial genre; that horror isn't ever acceptable for children; that children must be completely protected / insulated from dangerous media; that at 18 children magically transform into media-critical adults. It's also a touch ironic that three weeks earlier the author had also posted a column titled "In defence of Halloween" (31 October 2018)³, arguing that New Zealand should embrace the American holiday because of the monster-y pleasure it brings children. These issues, in conjunction with the spurious use of personal anecdote as data, offer a terrific site for discussion and analysis, especially in its cry of 'think of the children', and the assumptions about audience, consumption and genre. Hashtag: #notallhorror. How is horror perceived? How do people use their platforms to talk about horror, and why? How are children of various ages positioned, especially in terms of the long-standing treatment of the young as 'innocent' and pre-ideological? How might horror that is aimed at children balance genre specific concerns and the mandate 'to horrify'?⁴ And how is an R18 *horror* film perhaps perceived as different to restricted films in other genres, such as action or war films?

There are clear opportunities for engagement with issues of media and audience more broadly, too, especially with an interrogation of the way that film ratings and restrictions, which are largely intended to guide caregivers' decisions, are as widely ignored as they are

² See <http://www.emilywrites.co.nz/buy-rants-in-the-dark/>, which has had multiple print runs and an upcoming professional stage adaptation.

³ <https://thespinoff.co.nz/parenting/31-10-2018/emily-writes-in-defence-of-halloween/>

⁴ I am a fan of Catherine Lester's account of children's horror in this regard; see "The Children's Horror Film: Characterizing an "Impossible" Subgenre." *The Velvet Light Trap*, vol. 78, 2016, pp. 22-37. Project MUSE, muse.jhu.edu/article/628733.

acknowledged, outside of spaces such as cinemas or schools where their transgression might have specific legal consequences. Within New Zealand classrooms and critical spaces, it is helpful that the Office of Film, Literature and Classification (OFLC), the government agency colloquially termed the Censor's Office, is a thoughtful, public-friendly entity that provides extensive media literacy resources. These range from robust research on young people's engagement with and attitudes towards online pornography⁵, to a guide on how parents might talk with children of varying ages about media⁶, to resources on ratings decisions designed for use in secondary school assessment⁷, to a blog post from the Chief Censor gently criticising a university for attempting to censor a student magazine's vulgar cover.⁸ Interrogating (or challenging) how and why it is governments or legislators might classify material as potentially injurious is a much more interesting, and important discussion than yet another ain't it cool *Halloween* explainer or an autobiographical 'hear me out' column / apologia on why horror is fun.⁹

But the circulation and rapid-fire 'pitch, post, publish, walk away' cycle of hot takes also reveals some of our broader cultural and populist biases – patterns that can be used as a point of intervention, and a discussion about the way popular culture circulates within a highly connected yet lopsided global cultural environment. While horror hot takes are invariably about a handful of topics – horror's merits or lack thereof, popularity, 'meaning', politics, cultural awareness, persistence, classiness, trashiness, use, misuse, and so on – whether or not they originate from American commentators, they are almost overwhelmingly dominated by a focus on the dominance of *American* horror. They are also dominated by film texts in particular, within horror discourse and popular culture more broadly, although television shows such as *American Horror Story* and *The Haunting of Hill House* might get a look in, alongside digital moral panics such as those involving figures such as Slenderman. This clearly reflects other ways that in many parts of the world American culture is positioned as a dominant (Anglophone) voice, the pop culture lingua franca, and even the edifice against which other cultural forms push back against, much as post-colonial hip hop looks to, poaches from and diverges from its American forebears. This also erases the proliferation of diverse global horror voices, mistaking a specific conversation for a universal one, or positioning a sweeping account

⁵ <https://www.classificationoffice.govt.nz/assets/PDFs/NZYouthPorn-OFLC-December2018-PrintVersion.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.classificationoffice.govt.nz/public/information-for-parents-and-caregivers/>

⁷ <https://www.censor.org.nz/>

⁸ <https://www.classificationoffice.govt.nz/blog/chief-censor-that-c-word/>

⁹ For example, see this timeline which briefly discusses classification decisions relating to *Irreversible*, *Baise-Moi* and *Hostel 2*: <https://www.classificationoffice.govt.nz/index.php/about-nz-classification/history-of-censorship-in-new-zealand/>

of individual high-profile films as a bellwether discussion about horror as a genre. Again:
#notallhorror

Some of the highest profile of these recent hot takes lean almost exclusively on American titles, and universalise their appeal and effect. Taylor Antrim's hot take for *Vogue*, "Wasn't this supposed to be the golden age of horror?" (9 November 2018)¹⁰ includes 20+ American titles (or co-productions) from the appallingly Z-grade to the sublime, alongside a smattering of well-received international films – *Raw*, *Thelma*, *Revenge* – which might be considered the cream of the 'foreign' crop, and thus perhaps a less-than-fair comparison. (This is also reflected in the 'when horror was good' post he links to, a cookie cutter 'why I love horror' take¹¹). This Amero-philia is a criticism that is perhaps implicit in Matt Donato's response to Antrim's piece for *Film*, "Don't believe the bad takes: 2018 has been a great year for horror movies" (13 November 2018)¹², in which he (fairly) accuses Antrim of being "clueless". He cites films from Indonesia (*Satan's Slaves*), Argentina (*Terrified*), South Korea (*Gonjiam: Haunted Asylum*), Australia (*Cargo*), Canada (*Pyewacket*) and the United Kingdom (*The Ritual*) as examples of top-quality scares. It's also notable that Netflix has been instrumental in marketing some of these titles internationally; we're about due a good hot take on distribution and streaming that moves past top 10 horror listicles.

Steve Rose's widely-critiqued article for *The Guardian* "How post-horror movies are taking over cinema" (6 July 2017)¹³ – a slightly cooler take, maybe, but just as frustrating – similarly leans almost entirely on American-made or –set films, and films with American leads (such as *Personal Shopper*). He does briefly acknowledge the stylistic influence of two East Asian films at the article's close, commenting that "[Apichatpong] Weerasethakul's entire career is basically post-horror", yet this statement is an astonishingly reductive (re-)contextualisation and co-option of the Thai auteur's work within his proposed, American-centric framework. It reminds me of the way that some readings of Greg McLean's *Wolf Creek* series have situated the texts within an American history of so-called 'torture porn' and rape revenge narratives (from the perspective of reception), while thoroughly missing the point of the films' interests in Australian masculine myth-making, postcolonial trauma and erasure, and Anglo-centric xenophobia. A potential exercise, at least for more advanced or savvy students, might be to think about how the high-profile American films cited within hot takes might be considered within the context of other national cinemas. What would happen if we create hot takes that

¹⁰ <https://www.vogue.com/article/horror-movies-2018-what-happened>

¹¹ <https://www.vogue.com/article/love-stories-2017-horror-films>

¹² <https://www.slashfilm.com/2018-horror-movies-are-good/>

¹³ <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/jul/06/post-horror-films-scary-movies-ghost-story-it-comes-at-night>

centralise Mexican, or Japanese, or Eastern European horror modes as our default viewing position, and that exoticise or marginalise American perspectives? How might students write hot takes that prioritise the interests and values (in the broadest sense) of other English-language nations, such as Canada or the United Kingdom? How does this challenge our assumptions about a default or ideal viewer? And if horror has an epicentre, where is it, and why? I am also very curious to know what horror hot takes look like outside of the Anglosphere, or in spaces that are more critical about American cultural hegemony and its impact upon what we watch, respond to, comment on, and why.

This emphasis upon American media, and an acknowledgement of the dominance of American popular culture, can nonetheless offer an alternative route into difficult conversations. The same applies, too, to the analysis of any non-local horror media at both regional and national levels. When we consider horror as an exploration of cultural fears and anxieties, and when hot takes are seen as statements about What Horror Means to Us, it is imperative that we consider who that 'us' is, or is implied to be. An extended, very self-centred example: it is notable that New Zealand students are quick to have strong, and often remarkably detailed, views on American culture and politics, but are profoundly loath to engage with local issues and politics. Perhaps this is because high-profile international issues in English-speaking countries (and the vulgarity and spectacle of some aspects of US, Australian and UK politics, including Brexit, Trump's nexus of awfulness, and Australia's human rights abuses and inability to hold onto a Prime Minister) are seen as a something of a spectator sport, whereas local issues require you to engage in self-reflection and, often, to nail your political colours to the mast. This can be a big ask, given many New Zealanders' political reticence, and the broad reluctance (in particular of the Pākehā / New Zealand European students who dominate our classrooms) to reflect upon our own problems with colonialism, racism, family violence, and gender inequity. Perhaps this, alongside a history of cultural cringe, also speaks to New Zealand's reluctance to make 'serious', gritty horror films in lieu of splatstick and tongue-in-cheek horror comedies.¹⁴ Students are therefore much more likely to put forth opinions (informed or otherwise) about American race relations, including the history of slavery and segregation, through the lens of *Get Out*, than they are to think about genre films from New Zealand (or more broadly, the South Pacific) that interrogate local issues of race, whiteness and systemic violence. Nonetheless, there are spaces of overlap and reciprocity, such as our own history of racism and race-related violence, histories of white colonial privilege, the gross over-representation of Māori (indigenous New Zealanders) in jail and police statistics – like the United States, New Zealand has a highly carceral justice system - and the prevalence and impact of racial profiling. The

¹⁴ See <https://www.nzonscreen.com/spotlight/kiwi-comedy-horror>

flurry of socially conscious think pieces on Peele's film, especially those that have unpacked its deliberate use of iconography and its position within cinema history are valuable and primers and as footholds, just as pieces on the 'rise' (cough) of female-centric horror might do similar things for discussions about gendered representation, female subjectivity and narrative.

Hot takes are an accessible and easy-to-read form of populist engagement, and their straightforward dogmatism (and, sometimes, their lack of deep critical engagement) might be an unexpected pedagogical boon, especially if they can foster comparative analysis and bridge the gap between American and non-American film, or negotiate issues of cultural discomfort, or dissipate some of the terror that can come with engaging with theory and 'proper' readings. They can be used to tentatively move into difficult spaces by initially offering a sense of comfortable distance, before leading an analysis into murkier local waters, much as genre itself sometimes displaces serious, fraught issues out of the realms of realism and into fantasy. Perhaps? Maybe this is all a little optimistic, but if we can't make hot takes better, then we can at least put the buzzing little annoyances to work.