

BOOK REVIEWS: LITERARY AND CULTURAL CRITICISM

Jessica Gildersleeve, *Don't Look Now*

(England: Auteur Publishing, 2017)

Jessica Gildersleeve's book *Don't Look Now* is an enlightening and provocative treatment of Nicolas Roeg's 1973 film of the same name, providing an elucidating account of the film and its place in the horror genre. Gildersleeve argues that Roeg's *Don't Look Now* 'depends utterly on the narrative of trauma – on the horror of unknowing, of seeing too late, and of the failures of paternal authority and responsibility' (p. 7). Compared with other horror offerings of the 1970s, Roeg's film, Gildersleeve writes, 'is notable for its restraint' and 'highly aesthetic style' (p. 12), 'more artistic and high culture in its aims' (p. 13); following Noël Carroll, she goes on to describe the film as 'art-horror' (p. 16). The book proposes that *Don't Look Now* marks a departure from the more explicit depictions of violence and monstrosity that characterise the horror genre more broadly, and in particular popular films such as *The Exorcist*, which was released the same year.

Although Roeg's film did not garner the same attention as *The Exorcist*, Gildersleeve claims that it 'offers up a different kind of horror than most other films of the period'. She argues that it represents 'a hinge between literature and film of the 1970s, and [highlights] the ways in which the "women's ghost story" or "uncanny story" turns the horror film into a cultural commentary on the failures of the modern family' (p. 8). The book successfully demonstrates how horror, anxiety, and family dynamics are entangled in Roeg's film, particularly how 'the patriarchal figure [...] is under threat, not only by alternative forms of knowledge [...] but by the erasure of the child, the locus of the family's futurity and the law of primogeniture', as well as by 'the failure of patriarchal emotional knowledge and a fundamental misreading of the locus of threat' (p. 19). Essentially, the book argues that the horror of the film revolves around anxieties about the law and paternal authority coming under attack, resulting in John's (Donald Sutherland) failure to interpret the numerous threats that his character faces throughout the film. For example, the opening scene of the film introduces John's trauma by way of parallel action; the sequence depicts John lost in his work while his daughter plays near a lake on their property into which she eventually falls and drowns. This is the first instance of John missing a sign of danger. Later on in the film, John witnesses a mannequin being pulled from a Venice waterway, an image that functions as a

kind of premonition of John's wife Laura's (Julie Christie) death by way of drowning. In the latter scene, John's propensity to miss signs of danger is again evident, while the motif of drowning is repeated from the opening scene. Here, *Don't Look Now* comments on the repetition of trauma through a series of missed encounters with signs of danger, providing commentary on the failures of paternal authority in the film. By focusing the narrative around the trope of the family in crisis in the aftermath of the death of a child, and indexing the 'cultural disruptions' of the era, *Don't Look Now*, Gildersleeve argues, comments on 'the traumatic undermining of certainty and authority and the law' (p. 15).

Gildersleeve also discusses the correspondences between psychoanalysis and horror cinema in general, highlighting the intimate relationship between the two by indicating how *Don't Look Now* 'extends the psychoanalytic discourse' (p. 14). The book reconfigures 'the relationship between horror films, psychoanalysis and the cultural concerns in Britain during the 1970s', as well as illustrating the many ways in which Roeg's film comments on affect theory (p. 15). For Gildersleeve, the film 'plays out the horror of the unconscious', while depicting 'the horrific stasis of anxiety' (p. 15). In this way, *Don't Look Now* situates the film in the 'context of poststructuralism and affect theory' (p. 15), commenting on the ethical, cultural, and social implications of the film in terms of the emotions engendered by the film's horror elements.

To this end, Chapter One situates the film within 'the context of 1970s critical theory, such as deconstruction and reader response theory'. Gildersleeve claims that, although the narrative arc is more conventional than some of Roeg's other films, such as *The Man Who Fell From Earth* (1976) and *Bad Timing* (1980), *Don't Look Now* 'is hardly a conventional narrative in any other sense' (p. 23). One of the more audacious claims of the entire book is found in this chapter, namely that 'the viewer of *Don't Look Now* must combine [the film's tropes] with the discourses of late twentieth-century critical theory in order to comment on the function of emotion, for both character and viewer, in contemporary horror narratives' (p. 23). Although it is somewhat unclear why the viewer 'must' follow this injunction, it is difficult to disagree with the author's deft triangulation between affect, spectatorship, and narrative. Gildersleeve notes that, although the critical reception of the film was mixed, audiences recognised the film's psychological underpinnings, particularly its 'continual, mounting anxiety', which set it apart from 'the corporeal horror of *The Exorcist*' and other body horror films (p. 24). As Gildersleeve persuasively demonstrates, the affective registers

of the film – trauma and anxiety – provoke a ‘critical re-evaluation of the psychoanalysis of cinematic fear’, hinging upon the ‘critical theory of trauma’ (p. 28).

Chapters Two and Three unpack the film’s engagement with psychic phenomena and practices, exploring the ‘anxiety or dread of traumatic clairvoyance’ and the ‘logic of mourning’ that drive the narrative forward (pp. 30-31). Derrida’s notion of *destinerrance* is employed here to examine the trauma of misreading and the perpetually deferred arrival of meaning through the visual, temporal, and spatial forms contributing both to John’s ‘patriarchal hysteria’, and to his ultimate demise (p. 51). Gildersleeve attributes John’s brutal death at the end of the film to his misreadings of the site, image, and temporality of threat, turning to the Freudian notion of the death drive (*Todestrieb*) to make sense of John’s multiple misreadings (p. 53).¹

The book’s fourth chapter examines how the different settings in the film ‘evoke the horror of different kinds of disruption’, focusing on the country home and garden of the film’s opening sequence, the hotel and ruined church in Venice, and the overall function of Venice itself as a ‘liminal and labyrinthine space’ (p. 57). Analysing the unique presence of the female characters in the film, like the strange sisters Heather (Hilary Mason) and Wendy (Clelia Matania), Gildersleeve writes that the film’s *dérelict* women form a horizontal relation, a new community, which reacts against John, [the] symbol of the patriarchal values which make them *dérelict* in the first place’ (p. 70). The book’s conclusion provides a compelling account of gender and space, as the *dérelict* spaces of the film are connected to the film’s *dérelict* women, proving to be a high point of the book, and providing a much-needed reflection our often-spontaneous acquiescence to patriarchal norms governing society and space (p. 71).

Gildersleeve’s *Don’t Look Now* features an impressive amalgam of theoretical, critical, and cultural elements, offering a refreshing commentary on Roeg’s classic film and the often-underappreciated application of psychoanalytic theory. In many ways, Gildersleeve’s *Don’t Look Now* is reminiscent of the psychoanalytic film theory that emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s. Although for some readers – especially subscribers of the Lacanian variety of psychoanalytic film theory espoused by Todd McGowan and Joan Copjec – *Don’t Look Now* may read as a dated account of psychoanalytic concepts, Gildersleeve nonetheless offers a pertinent and valuable rereading with which to reconsider the

¹ It is perhaps worth noting that *Don’t Look Now* employs the more parochial reading of *Todestrieb* as the drive toward death and self-destruction, and not the more recent definition espoused by Slavoj Žižek as the piece of the drive that refuses to die, marking stubborn persistence even after death (see Slavoj Žižek, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), pp. 131-32.)

intersections between horror, affect, and psychoanalytic theory. The reader should not be fooled by the brevity and concision with which this text is written; despite being just under ninety pages, Gildersleeve efficiently and effectively teases out the psychological subtleties of Roeg's difficult work, providing a much-needed reassessment of the film, the horror genre, and the critical tradition of cinema studies as a whole.

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