Mark Schmitt, *Spectres of Pessimism: A Cultural Logic of the Worst*
(Palgrave Macmillan, 2023)

Much recent scholarship in horror and the gothic has argued that these literary modes have close connections with pessimistic philosophy, often asserting that this philosophical disposition is a crucial component of these modes. In Thomas Ligotti's non-fiction essay collection *A Conspiracy against the Human Race* (2010), for example, the Lovecraftian author connects the weird fiction of Algernon Blackwood with pessimists such as Albert Camus, arguing that the same hopeless outlook for humanity and the universe permeates their work. And contemporary philosophers such as Eugene Thacker and Graham Harman have organised philosophical treaties around the philosophical principles embedded within the horror genre. Into this world steps Mark Schmitt's *Spectres of Pessimism*, a brief (yet densely packed) handbook that will help scholars of horror and the gothic become conversant with this corner of the philosophical world.

The introductory chapter argues that pessimistic philosophy is key to understanding our current cultural moment. Schmitt sees pessimism as both 'an affective as well as intellectual pattern' (p. 7), leading him to incorporate aspects of the thinking of Sara Ahmed and Thacker to encompass these realms of both thinking and feeling. Schmitt sees pessimism as being, at its root, an attempt to grapple with the 'loss of the future', which, using concepts developed by Jacques Derrida and Mark Fisher, makes it a 'fundamentally hauntological concern' (p. 9). However, Schmitt argues that pessimism 'goes one step further than hauntology' in not only grieving for lost futures, but presenting 'the worst possible alternative future' (p. 9). As an example of how pessimism has burrowed into our current cultural moment, Schmitt concludes the Introduction with a reading of Hari Kunzru's novel *Red Pill* (2019), which Schmitt reads as exploring the 'ethical pessimism about the state of the world and the future', as well as a 'politicised celebration of humanity's worst' – pessimism embodied as nihilism (pp. 16-17).

This leads into Chapter 2, centred on the radical utopianism of Antonio Gramsci as a political response to intellectual pessimism. In exploring Gramsci's thought, Schmitt differentiates between 'political pessimism' on the one hand, which can lead to 'stagnant sentiments' and a general inability to act for positive change (p. 29); and on the other, 'intellectual pessimism', which is instead an 'important analytical tool' (p. 30). Schmitt summarises Gramsci's thinking on pessimism, writing: 'It seems, then, that a true hope that can actually serve as an empowering affect that constitutes agency and triggers change cannot be held without a suitable mode of pessimist analysis' (p. 45). Though Schmitt concludes the

chapter without further textual analysis, it seems an obvious next step for scholars to apply this formulation to gothic and horror texts. Indeed, it would be useful to consider whether the pessimism presented in such texts is one of politics or of the intellect.

From this exploration of utopianism and pessimism, Schmitt moves to anti-utopianism and afropessimism in Chapter 3. Schmitt sees pessimism and utopianism as participating in a 'productive dialectic' (p. 51), a dialectic which can be most easily observed in works of afropessimism such as Steve McQueen's 2020 film *Education*. Schmitt looks at the radical utopianism of such thinkers as Mathias Thaler and John Storey, and sees in them an effort to unsettle 'the preconditions of the thinkable', which has the effect of 'offer[ing] ways to consider new possibilities or at least to reframe the present' (p. 54). Schmitt sees the same impulse at work in pessimism, which asks us to consider possibilities outside of the bounds of the present moment and its evolution into the future. Schmitt argues that a similar dialectic is at play in afrofuturism, which takes the current 'historical trauma' as its starting point, but then 'uses it as a precondition for imagining the future otherwise' (p. 60). Afropessimism, on the other hand, 'sees the present and future of Black lives as caught in permanent transhistorical social death' (p. 60). However, Schmitt uses the work of Frank Wilderson III to suggest that afropessimism 'articulates (and thus offers Black people the freedom to articulate) the otherwise unsayable about social relations in cultures marked by white hegemony' (p. 62). In essence, Schmitt sees afrofuturism as focused on imagining a new future, even if it seems impossible from the starting point of the present, while afropessimism focuses on the impossibility of enduring in the present. However, both serve to move us outside of the constrains of the present – afrofuturism by imagining something other, afropessimism by focusing on the impossibility of the currently existing state. In this way, both afrofuturism and afropessimism serve as analytical tools to help us imagine something other than the present moment. Schmitt finds this dialect represented in the short film *Education*, which Schmitt reads as being 'suggestive of a utopian vision of the future born from the restored past' (p. 67) – a utopian vision that is only possible once the utter hopelessness of the present has been fully internalised, so that any notion of incremental progress can be discarded.

Chapter 4 turns to Lee Edelman's 'reproductive pessimism', and connects it with the questions of knowledge of the future asked by the films *Arrival* (dir. by Denis Villeneuve, 2016) and *Irréversible* (dir. by Gaspar Noé, 2002). Schmitt groups together queer pessimism and antinatalist philosophies under this umbrella, arguing that both offer a 'critique of heteronormative reproductive futurism' (p. 78), which asks us to consider whether we can 'mourn the future' (p. 74). While hauntology is not directly invoked in this chapter, this

question seems to make a clear link between reproductive pessimism and the work of scholars such as Derrida and Fisher. The second half of the chapter reads *Arrival* (and the Ted Chiang's 1998 novella on which its based, entitled 'Story of Your Life') and *Irréversible* as two films that disrupt narrative continuity to explore this question of grievable futures (Schmitt also includes a very cogent discussion of the troubling nature of *Irréversible*'s relation to homosexuality). For Schmitt, both *Arrival* and *Irréversible* offer a pessimist perspective: even if we had the ability to 'disrupt the equilibrium of time, it would merely have a temporary effect' (p. 93). Both films suggest that foreknowledge of future tragedies – on the part of the characters, the viewers, or both – only makes salient what pessimism knows already to be true: positive future outcomes have always already been foreclosed.

The book's final chapter looks at contemporary apocalyptic thought through the frame of cosmic pessimism. Schmitt begins with the cosmic pessimism of Ligotti and Thacker, observing that these thinkers participate in a strand of 'existential pessimism' that does not see life as an inherent good, and refuses to find 'appropriations of pessimism for political ends', instead serving as 'pure negation' (p. 100). Schmitt summarises this philosophy as being about 'the notion of extinction as the future horizon that determines possibility in the present', a mode of thinking that has become increasingly common among ecological philosophers as well (p. 107). In the chapter's concluding pages, Schmitt reads Lars von Trier's film *Melancholia* (2011) as embracing 'the end of the world as an end to the nihilistic capitalist logic that has hollowed out human relationships and is devastating the planet' (p. 111). Schmitt finds a similar logic in Camille Griffin's film *Silent Night* (2021), which juxtaposes a commonplace political pessimism with a much more deep-seated, cosmic pessimism, in which the impending end of the world is something to be celebrated. In accepting the end of the world, we become free of the impossible burden of having to fix everything – as well as having the opportunity to embrace the knowledge that the universe will continue after humanity has left.

The volume's Conclusion is brief – only four pages plus notes – but asks some significant questions. Schmitt suggests that much of the current landscape of cultural studies embodies a 'future- and hope-oriented disposition' (p. 123), one in which the 'no-saying of pessimism' is an uneasy fit. However, Schmitt suggests that in viewing pessimistic thought as 'that which always resists', we might come to see how pessimism can play a more constructive role in the Humanities. But even here, Schmitt cautions that this kind of thinking might be 'reducing pessimism to its "use value"' (p. 123), which can easily have the effect of domesticating pessimistic thought into a much more palatable form.

This slender, dense volume has much to offer scholars of the gothic in particular, and Cultural Studies more broadly. Schmitt makes a strong case that the history of pessimistic thought should be incorporated into our understanding of what drives popular culture, particularly in its current moment. In the context of Horror Studies, this point has been made before – but probably not often enough and forcefully enough. There's a also strong case to be made that, in addition to the affective responses that the genre attempts to create, a pessimistic worldview is one of the most important features of horror and the gothic. Schmitt's work not only makes this case, but provides the tools that scholars need to approach these questions in their own analyses.

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