Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, *Masks in Horror Cinema: Eyes Without Faces*
(University Wales Press, 2019)

With Alexandra Heller-Nicholas' consideration of the role and meaning of masks in horror cinema, entitled *Masks in Horror Cinema: Eyes Without Faces*, the Horror Studies imprint from University Wales Press adds to an already-impressive line-up of publications. The monograph opens with an anecdotal narrative about the Belarusian director Makinov, who appeared masked during both the promotion and, allegedly, the shooting of his film *Come Out and Play* (2012). Heller-Nicholas uses the story as a way to open a discussion of the symbolism behind masks in horror cinema: 'Whether a publicity stunt or a material manifestation of [Makinov's] aesthetic philosophy, this is a memorable instance of the potency of horror film masks' (p. 1). The argument here is that audiences have a seemingly innate understanding of this symbolism when it is encountered in film (and, arguably, in the case of Makinov, outside of it), yet the study of the meanings that become inscribed on the masked characters in horror has been overlooked, a misstep that Heller-Nicholas here wishes to rectify. In her effort to do so, she covers a wealth of academic and primary sources, and provides a particular framework for analysis, which both serves the book under review here and will benefit future study of the topic.

The monograph is divided into four parts: the first (unnumbered) part, encompassing the opening two chapters, is primarily concerned with setting up the approach used in the publication regarding the study of masks. Heller-Nicholas positions the role of the mask in horror as stemming from shamanistic traditions, but clearly distinguishes her approach from previous discussions of the topic within such a framework. Referring to the concept of shamanic imagination, the author sets out here to decouple the horror mask from too tight a link to pre-existing anthropological perspectives, instead arguing for 'a looser, more elastic [interpretation] that accounts for how the power of masks are broadly conceived' (p. 23). In order to do so, Heller-Nicholas centres her analysis around three core concepts, linked to ritual, power, and transformation, as a way of positioning horror masks within their respective narratives, with a focus on the material aspects of these appearances. Doing so allows for a particular and flexible means of understanding the horror mask *within its context*, an aspect that will prove important for the analysis of case studies provided by Heller-Nicholas. This initial discussion is followed by a thorough examination of the context for horror masks and their appearance pre-1970s, provided in Part 1, which looks to early film as well as performance and literature as fertile ground for examining the rise to prominence of this particular motif.

Heller-Nicholas moves away from a solely Anglophone focus, incorporating references to other European, Latin American, and Asian traditions of performance and film, providing a breadth of examples that is continued throughout the book. When looking at such a wide range of case studies, Heller-Nicholas does not remove these from the national (cinematic) traditions in which they appear. Rather, due to the elasticity of approaching the motif of the mask through the concept of the 'shamanic imagination', examples are framed within their contexts, which, as the author shows, often imbue the presence of the mask with further layers of meaning.

The three concepts of ritual, power, and transformation are carried forward into the case studies found in Parts 2 and 3. The four chapters within these sections are arranged thematically, according to the type of mask and its function within the narrative. The chapters cover skin masks 'that replicate the human face' (p. 90); blank masks, which 'simultaneously erase identity and create spaces to project new meanings onto' (p. 112); animal masks, which 'symbolically transform their wearers into something less-than-human' (p. 129); and repurposed masks, 'objects whose initial intended functions are redeployed in horror to create new cultural meanings' (p. 149). Within these chapters, case studies are arranged in relation to specific themes relevant to the type of mask discussed, including, but not limited to religion, class, and labour; feminine/ masculine identities; and totemism and transformation. Although this covers a lot of ground, Heller-Nicholas manages to bring sufficiently detailed levels of analysis to each type of mask and subsequent theme, and her argument remains convincing throughout.

The same is true for the final category, technological masks, which is separated out in its own part of the monograph. Here, Heller-Nicholas states that she wishes to examine the 'contemporary intersection of technology, transformation, power and ritual', expanding the core concepts by one (p. 169). However, the approach here remains comparable to the one adopted in the second part in its provision of a detailed analysis of a variety of filmic examples from across different cultures. Although each of the elements addressed in Parts 2 and 3 (different masks, themes, and case studies) might be seen as introducing a potential diffusion to the argument, the central pillars established in the early parts of the book provide a robust framework for the analysis that is followed throughout.

To some, the study provided by Heller-Nicholas may appear superficial, as the material covered in the monograph is so wide in scope. Indeed, it cannot be denied that the book covers roughly a century of horror culture and touches on forms beyond cinema, including literature and performance. However, I would argue that this is not to the detriment of the work, but instead adds to its aims of presenting a detailed overview of masks in horror, charting the

context and emergence of the motif beyond the concerns raised by the case studies that are the focal point of Parts 2 and 3. Although the central concepts and the framing that they provide could be articulated more clearly, in addressing the subject matter in this way, Heller-Nicholas has paved the way into this fascinating area of study and the relevant texts (both academic and artistic), thus creating a starting point for future scholarship on the topic.

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