David Church, *Post-Horror: Art, Genre, and Cultural Elevation*
(Edinburgh University Press, 2021)

Genre-literate fans with a positive disposition towards the horror-film corpus may rankle initially at the title of David Church's book *Post-Horror*. The term 'post-horror' is one of many attempts at putting a name to what has widely been viewed as a new wave in horror filmmaking, one that has generally received plaudits from critics (even those 'horror sceptics').[1] Church provides a sustained investigation of the various appellations that have been ventured: in addition to 'post-horror' we have 'elevated', 'slow', 'quiet', 'indie', 'prestige', and (perhaps most condescendingly) 'smart' horror. Fans and critics alike have attacked these labels as snobbish, denoting little more than horror films that are acceptable to the literati.[2] At the book's opening, Church moves quickly to address these concerns: designations like 'elevated horror', he acknowledges, come 'freighted with elitist biases against the horror genre itself' (p. 3). The initial question demanded by the title and subject matter of Church's book is whether these films *really* have anything in common, besides their approval by cultural gatekeepers.

Church argues convincingly that they do, and seems to adopt 'post horror' as his preferred nomenclature, partly to spare the reader from another idiosyncratic academic coinage, partly because it is the least problematic term available, and partly because it articulates (if imperfectly) what he is trying to assert about the films gathered under its heading. Comparing the 'post' in post-horror to that in 'post-irony', Church suggests that the films constitute a coherent corpus in which 'horror's well-established generic tropes and themes [are] taken as read, but stylistically revamped in such a way as to prioritize (negative) affect differently' (p. 37). The key term here is 'stylistic', for form and style are what, in Church's telling, set post-horror demonstrably apart as a subgenre (or what he calls a 'cycle'). In Chapter 1, he sets out to identify these unifying traits. In some sense these films are linked by what they lack, namely 'graphic violence/gore', the classic jump scare, and the 'unrealistic monsters' that stalk the reels of David Cronberg's *The Fly* (1986) or the *Jeepers Creepers* (2001-22) series (p. 9). More

[1] Aya Tsintziras, for example, describes A24's list of filmic offerings as 'elevated' and 'important', as against simple 'fun slashers like *Friday the 13th*'; Tsintziras, 'Does the Slasher Genre Need to be Elevated?', *GameRant,* 15 June 2022 <https://gamerant.com/should-slasher-horror-genre-be-elevated/> [accessed 26 August 2026].

[2] See for example David Ehrlich, 'The Evils of "Elevated Horror" – IndieWire Critics Survey', *IndieWire,* 25 March 2019 <https://www.indiewire.com/features/general/elevated-horror-movies-us-1202053471/>; Lor Gislason, 'Why Elevated Horror is an Unnecessary and Elitist Term', *Horror Obsessive*, 2021 <https://horrorobsessive.com/2021/09/04/why-elevated-horror-is-an-unnecessary-and-elitist-term>; and Erich Asperschlager, 'Genre Neutral: Looking Past 'Post-Horror', *F This Movie*, 12 September 2017 <http://www.fthismovie.net/2017/09/genre-neutral-looking-past-post-horror.html> [all accessed 26 August 2026].

fundamentally, the films under discussion share an inheritance from art-cinema and 'slow film', emphasising minimalism and restraint alongside stylistic features like long shots, and a general emphasis on building tension and dread rather than visceral repulsion or jump-scare terror.

Delineating a genre requires the construction of a canon with a centre and a periphery, and this Church duly supplies: Table 1.1 lists what he takes as the primary and secondary texts, with the former adhering more closely to the stylistic conventions the author has traced out (p. 14). With the cycle defined and defended, Church moves in Chapter 2 to account for some of the conflict between genre fans and formal critics over the post-horror cycle. Division is a recurring theme of the book: much stress is laid upon the disconnect between these films' reception by critics and 'popular' audiences (*The Babadook* (dir. by Jennifer Kent, 2014), for example, has a 98% critical score on review-aggregate website RottenTomatoes.com, but only a 72% audience score).[3] In large part, Church argues, this divide can be attributed to post-horror's reliance upon conventions derived from art-cinema, and its exploration of forms of negative affect (such as grief and dread) beyond the 'usual' visceral fear that is horror's stock in trade.

Each chapter expands upon post-horror's debt to earlier films and film trends, as well as deepening the reader's understanding of its influence outside of the standard horror corpus, and its sometimes-fraught relationship to the genre 'proper'. The third chapter traces the treatment of grief and trauma in post-horror films like *Goodnight Mommy* (dir. by Veronika Franz and Severin Fiala, 2014) and *Hereditary* (dir. by Ari Aster, 2018) to the (generally gynocentric) 'mourning films' of the mid-twentieth century, and highlights the influence of the gothic on both. Chapter 4 is a close reading of *Midsommar* (dir. by Ari Aster, 2019), *Get Out* (dir. by Jordan Peele, 2017), and *The Invitation* (dir. by Karyn Kusama, 2015), and centres on the theme of gaslighting that recurs across all three films. What is missed here is an opportunity to link this form of abuse, which Church describes as 'epistemic violence', to the 'epistemic hesitation' (pp. 104 and 87) that haunts films like *The Witch* (dir. by Robert Eggers, 2015). In those films, the audience is left uncertain as to whether they can trust their surface-level reading (is there really a witch in the woods?). Gaslighting seems a natural escalation of this idea, in that it weaponises such uncertainty against character and viewer alike. Church's interpretation of *Midsommar* is also weakened somewhat by a simplistic reading of Christian's climactic

[3] '*The Babadook*', *RottenTomatoes.com* <https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_babadook> [accessed 26 August 2026].

moment of sexual betrayal, which the author glosses over as a more-or-less straightforward act of infidelity. The film, though, stresses that Christian is acting under the influence of both a perverse love spell and psychoactive drugs.[4] Chief among the reasons that the scene is so uncomfortable to watch is Christian's clearly drugged stupor, as he is made to penetrate Maja with little apparent awareness of or pleasure in the act. Given that Church is careful to qualify readings of films like *Midsommar* or *The Witch* as liberatory or feminist, it is odd that he omits this detail, which further implicates the cultic Hårga in their gaslighting and abuse of Dani and her friends to an extent that encompasses overt sexual victimisation. Ultimately, though, this is a minor point, and Church's explorations of the films he treats are generally rich in nuance.

Chapter 5 is in part an attempt at correcting a trend in which, as Karl Schoonover notes, scholars have tended to focus on horror films' use of confined spaces at the expense of ignoring their deployment of vast and vacant landscapes. Turning chiefly towards *Under the Skin* (dir. by Jonathan Glazer, 2013), *Hagazussa: A Heathen's Curse* (dir. by Lukas Feigelfeld, 2017), and *The Lighthouse* (dir. by Robert Eggers, 2019), Church meditates on these films' long, eerie shots of sublimely massive spaces as evincing the 'limits of the human as a source of both horror and aesthetic contemplation' (p. 144). Joined to this is a consideration of the intersection of landscape and gender: *The Witch, Hagazussa*, and *Gretel & Hansel* (dir. by Osgood Perkins, 2020) all figure the uncultivated forest as a locus of patriarchal anxiety over unbounded fertility, spaces in which abundant female power threatens to assert itself over a structured and delimited masculine order.

The sixth chapter builds upon these themes of landscape and gender by finding, in *It Follows* (dir. by David Robert Mitchell, 2014), an 'ironic critique of monogamy as a monstrous force', set amidst the 'ruin-porn' vistas of a crumbling Detroit (p. 22). In the book's closing section, Church turns to the spiritual-metaphysical concerns of films like *A Dark Song* (dir. by Liam Gavin, 2016), *mother!* (dir. by Darren Aronofsky, 2017), and *A Ghost Story* (dir. by David Lowery, 2017). Of particular interest is his concept of 'ghost time' (as opposed to 'human time'), in which 'months, decades, and even centuries of human history pass fluidly via temporal ellipses', while 'specific (lived) moments' drag on for eternities (p. 226). Although this is not stressed in the book, we might see time here as playing a similar role in *A Ghost Story* as space does in Chapter 5: both function as a vastness that emphasises the cosmic smallness of human life.

[4] There is a degree of 'epistemic hesitation' on display in this scene, as well; it is not at all clear how seriously the audience should take the reality or efficacy of the magic spell on display.

The book's unity is chiefly thematic rather than argumentative: no one thesis is really pursued through all seven chapters. A handful of recurring ideas – the cinematic ancestry of post-horror, the stylistic devices by which it generates affect, the division that it fosters between critics, fans, and popular audiences – hold the work together, although individual scholars will likely find some chapters more useful than others, according to their particular research interests. Some opportunities at stressing the thematic interconnection between chapters are missed: the 'horrors of monogamy' explored in Chapter 6 might have been fruitfully joined to Chapter 4's discussions of *Midsommar* and *Get Out*, for example. Still, Church's prose is lucid, and he wears his considerable scholarship lightly, rendering the book eminently accessible to nonspecialists without sacrificing its utility to academic audiences. Overall, *Post-Horror* constitutes a valuable contribution to the scholarship surrounding this nascent cycle of strange and divisive films.

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