

***The Postmodern Slasher Film*, by Steve Jones. Edinburgh University Press, 2025, 272 pp.**

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“Do you like scary movies?” This line has become synonymous not just with *Scream* (Wes Craven, 1996), but also with the new wave of slasher horror cinema that followed it. This era, from the late 1990s to the very early 2000s and frequently referred to as the postmodern era of the slasher film, was frequently derided by critics, which led to the works within this subgenre being ignored and going unstudied. This absence of critical discourse has finally been remedied by Steve Jones’ *The Postmodern Slasher Film*, a book length study of these works, whose ultimate goal is to determine what separates these works from the slashers that came before them.

Jones begins by defining postmodernism as it was understood by the contemporary lay critic studying such films when they were released. He positions postmodern slashers as slashers that are characterised by two main qualities: intertextuality and metafictional self-reflexivity (1). These films are also often characterised by their similarity to *Scream* and its ensuing franchise. Jones immediately problematises this premise by suggesting that *Scream*’s status as a postmodern text is contestable and that other movies before *Scream* had previously done the things it is claimed to have innovated, while other slasher films have managed postmodernism better. He does however suggest that *Scream* is a postmodern text for other reasons, such as an emphasis on playing games with its audience and a distinctive tone characterised by self-consciousness, duplicity, cynicism and fatalism. One of the book’s weaknesses becomes apparent in the introduction, namely, its unusual framing technique. There are many ways that this point could have been framed. For instance, another film could have been put forward as the herald of postmodernist slashers or the entire designation could have been called into question. Jones instead takes on a whiplash-inducing framework, wherein he frustratingly spends chapters suggesting that the films in this subgenre are simultaneously postmodern and not, innovative and not, relevant and not. This is not to say that his arguments are unsound, but rather that it would seem that there is a more direct way to get to them. Jones finishes his introduction by suggesting that *Scream* concurrently is and is not postmodern.

Jones devotes quite some time to masterfully defining his terms, starting with a comprehensive definition of the slasher film, which he defines as “a narrative that showcases instances of violence perpetrated by an individual who systematically targets and kills multiple victims” (10). This killer is human and kills a group of people with a common trait. These individuals are often killed when alone or in vulnerable states and the longest surviving one will defeat the killer. Aided by this definition, Jones goes on to historicise the genre, again presenting a comprehensive study of where the genre started and how it has evolved. He divides the slasher subgenre into five major periods: the proto-slasher, the boom period, the period of supernatural slashers, the postmodern period and the metamodern phase (12). This division becomes a useful

construct in the following sections, particularly the boom period, which refers to the peak popularity of the subgenre, beginning with *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978). Jones goes on to devote the next four chapters to postmodern elements that he disavows, either as postmodernist in nature or as relevant or unique elements of *Scream* and other postmodern slashers.

Jones first points to intertextuality as a distinct postmodern element of these films before suggesting that its use is frequently superficial, leading to a discussion on the importance of self-consciousness, an awareness of the genre's role in cinema and an internalised critical judgment. The next section similarly discusses metafictional self-reflexivity by first pointing to the technique's role in the subgenre, before again dismissing it because it was not unique to the genre and was present in earlier slasher phases. It then returns to the postmodern designation by restating the importance of the self-conscious tone as an important part of this subgenre, differentiating it from the unself-conscious tone of earlier metafictional slasher films. One great benefit of this book becomes apparent here and that is Jones' ability to advocate for the importance of some seemingly undefendable works. In his study of metafiction, he refers to 1982's *The Last Horror Film* (David Winters), a film I found particularly egregious in its quality of storytelling and filmmaking, and he frankly does a fantastic job of defending its position in slasher history, almost making me question my own opinion.

He goes on to suggest that the postmodern turn may be related to the slasher's embrace of humour and parody elements, before once again dismissing that notion because there are numerous slasher parodies that predate this phase and because the postmodern slasher's questioning of its genre's conventions do not reach the standards of being considered parodic. This is followed by the final and perhaps most in-depth discussion of a postmodern element that will then be dismissed: the assumption of postmodern designation being related to the deconstruction of conventions of the subgenre. The author disagrees with this notion, because the films do not fully deconstruct their genres, as their in-film fictional realities are rarely disrupted, and because the techniques are not unique to this phase of the slasher (117). The first mention of authorial control and intent then follows. Jones points to the casting of famous TV actors who specialise in teen dramas and who are capable of developing their characters. This leads to a sense of realism, as the audience wants to cheer for these developed characters, which equates the audience to the characters. This is taken even further not just in *Scream*, but also in *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* (1994), in which Craven's existence within the film is made overtly obvious, making the reality therein unquestionable, but also deconstructing his role in the film. Jones dismisses this of course, claiming that authorial credit is a modernist concept and its uses are superficial.

At this point, the book begins to improve, as Jones introduces elements that designate this phase as postmodern without dismissing them soon after. Jones returns to his original statement about what made this postmodern phase unique, beginning with the duplicitous, ironic tone. This is perhaps the most important addition to the scholarship in this book. Jones suggests that these films are involved in a concurrent form of communication with two very different audiences in mind: the fans and the lay viewers, who experience the film differently, because the fans become involved in the game playing discussed earlier (142). A significant part of this game is the frequent barrage of in-jokes for the knowing audience, these jokes taking the form of references to real-world films, the in-world showing of real-world films, references to real-world films that do not suggest the films themselves (for example, naming a character after a character from another movie

without any diegetic connections) and other audio-visual cues. These elements excite the fans without changing anything for the unknowing viewer; the in-jokes never affect the story and the film can be enjoyed without being in on the joke, although incorporating characters that stand in as fans can make the lay viewer feel like a fan, leading to commercial success. This also brings the fans and the filmmaker closer as the filmmaker shows that they are as familiar with the source material as the fans. Jones goes on to complicate this relationship as an antagonistic one, the fans seeing themselves as superior to the lay viewer, but also in competition with the filmmaker in terms of their knowledge about the genre (145). This era encouraged film fans to feel superior to the cinema they consume, owing to paracinematic concepts like “so bad it’s good” and the popularity of shows like *Mystery Science Theatre 3000* (1988–). This game playing and antagonism thus blends in with the next study of the postmodern slasher as a modern whodunit.

Whodunits are endemic to this subgenre, because not only are the audience meant to use usual context clues to discover the murderer, but also generic conventions, which fans are goaded into using, even though they will often turn out to be red herrings. In this segment, Jones introduces questions of internal epistemic perspectives. While discussing the common complaint that slasher characters make illogical decisions, Jones points out that the characters and the viewers have very different understanding of the in-film world. The audience is aware that they are watching a horror film, while the characters are just living their lives, which is perfectly reasonable until it is too late (157). He further states that the audience usually takes on the point of view of the protagonist and therefore knows more than others, usually just enough to consider others “idiots.” This knowledge also works against the viewer, however, as the most necessary information is usually withheld until the reveal, which is why many killers in this genre end up revealing themselves, because they are the only ones who know for sure. This is another postmodern quality of the subgenre: the joyful overturning of what were once epistemological certainties and the democratic impulse of participatory co-construction of meaning, with the author observing the viewer and waiting for them to fail.

Jones devotes his final argument to the cynical tone of the postmodern slasher. The characters in these works are often borderline sociopathic, making glib jokes about their dead friends. The subgenre’s unwillingness to participate in sincere or meaningful engagement leads it to a point where the fear response is replaced with callous laughs at in-jokes. However, Jones also suggests that the audience is not invited to be callous, as we are meant to take on the perspective of the protagonist, the one person who does not approve of this callousness (193). This tone also extends to the subgenre’s view of its cultural zeitgeist and its future. The last postmodern element Jones discusses is the subgenre’s fatalist and presentist approach. Despite their frequent references to the past, the films always exist in the present. These references are meant to be seen as a modern understanding of the past, never as nostalgia and definitely never as progressive.

Postmodernism signals a loss of faith in the narrative of progress, suggesting that innovation is impossible and that we are simply doomed to repeat the past. Jones reiterates his earlier suggestion that the label is an appropriate one for this phase of cinema, but not for the reasons that most suggest. He also uses this label to historicise this subgenre as the ideological predecessor (but also antithesis) to both torture porn and the metamodern phase, which is more sincere and believes in innovation. Jones finally states the vitality and influence of this phase. Overall, he makes a good case for its importance, but it would have been better stated in a different

framework, in which the first half of the book was not involved in frequent bouts of self-contradiction. There are many valuable insights in this book, but they are often muddled with pedantic specificities that do not serve to push the discussion forward. The reader may well find themselves sighing at some of these arguments, thinking that the fact that a technique was used before does not necessarily disallow it to be seen as innovative and that the argument is frankly unnecessary. That being said, Jones' familiarity with and knowledge of this subgenre cannot be questioned. This is ultimately a valuable study of an underappreciated cinematic phenomenon.

References

Halloween. Directed by John Carpenter, Compass International Pictures, 1978.

The Last Horror Film. Directed by David Winters, Shere Productions, 1982.

Mystery Science Theater 3000. Created by Joel Hodgson, Best Brains, Inc., 1988.

Scream. Directed by Wes Craven, Woods Entertainment, 1996.

Wes Craven's New Nightmare. Directed by Wes Craven, New Line Productions, 1994.

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