

THE SHINING (2017) BY LAURA MEE

Review by Kevin Corstorphine

Mee, Laura. *The Shining*. Auteur, 2017. Book. 124 pp.

Laura Mee's *The Shining* appears as part of Auteur Publishing's *Devil's Advocates* series, each of which is focused on a single film. At just over a hundred pages, this is short and snappy, and so cannot cover the huge range of ground that is possible when discussing Stanley Kubrick's 1980 film (adapted from the Stephen King 1977 novel). It is pitched (and priced) for the general reader, but would be of interest to a scholarly audience too, with it being focused and informative.

At first glance the structure of the book is slightly puzzling, as it focuses on some of the negative responses that greeted the film on release, as well as portraying it as somewhat misunderstood: a curious way to approach what is one of the most recognisable Horror films in history. Mee's point lies, however, in that word: 'horror'. She argues that *The Shining's* place in film history has been defined by its director, Stanley Kubrick, whose reputation as temperamental genius auteur tends to overshadow the content of the individual productions. *The Shining*, she notes, was anticipated before its release primarily as a Kubrick film, not as a Horror film. In contrast to film critics, audiences have had no problem in aligning the film with the Horror genre and enjoying it as such. This is backed up with reference to popular surveys and studies of audience reaction when watching the film, for example tracking heart rates rising in response to scenes of horror. It is in approaching *The Shining* as Horror film that Mee stakes out her critical approach, making the case for the book offering a fresh perspective in line with the series' mission. Whilst Roger Luckhurst's 2013 entry of the same name in the BFI *Film Classics* series might appear to offer something similar to the reader, Mee argues that it has a different focus (on psychoanalysis and the theme of the maze) and so these can reasonably be seen as complimentary. It is perhaps as a result of Mee's attempt to distinguish her work from existing criticism that the reader might find some areas lacking. Theoretical approaches, for example, are very light on the ground, albeit with some use of the uncanny, the grotesque, and carnivalesque, as these are difficult to avoid. As they appear more fully in other sources, Mee usefully provides a good list of references for the curious to follow up.

The book is split into four chapters. The first, "Kubrick and Horror," focuses on the perceived difference between films made by acknowledged genre masters such as John Carpenter, Wes Craven, George A. Romero, and Dario Argento, and directors who worked across genres, such as Roman Polanski, Brian De Palma, William Friedkin, and of course Stanley Kubrick. The latter tend to be credited with romantic auteur status that allows them to transcend genre and produce something of higher cultural worth, or at least redefine the genre they are working within. On the other hand, they might also be seen as dabbling in something they do not fully understand. Kubrick's films, Mee notes, have been associated with a "coldness" not fitting with the expectations of, for

example, Horror fans (20). Mee stridently dismisses these insinuations and argues forthrightly that in reality, Kubrick's style was well-suited to Horror and he had every intention of making an effective Horror film. This is demonstrated with reference to his other work, thematically and stylistically. An abiding interest in the darker recesses of the human psyche appears in films such as *Lolita* (1962), *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), but find specific and sustained exploration in *The Shining*. Like *The Shining*, *Dr Strangelove* (1964) uses comedy (although more overtly) in order to convey what is at heart, pure horror. Kubrick's elegant visual style may be very different from previous genre Horror successes like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), but the effective use of techniques such as tracking shots to build tension, or *mise-en-scène* to produce a sense of general unease throughout, mean that Kubrick was taking seriously the Horror genre's affective purpose and that there is no reason not to think of this as a genre Horror film.

The second chapter considers the process of adapting *The Shining* and shifts the question to the film's use of its source material. This is something that must be addressed directly, as author Stephen King's well-publicised dislike of the film is another factor that tends to overshadow the discussion. Mee provides useful contextual discussion of the way that Kubrick approached adapting the novel, and indeed Mee points out that adaptation is a significant feature of Kubrick's work, as the majority of his films have been adapted from novels or short stories. The key question of adaptation when filming a sprawling novel like *The Shining*, of course, is narrative compression. The film must be shorter by necessity, but what is chosen to focus on and what is cut is the really interesting part. Again, Mee uses this analysis in order to back up the central argument that Kubrick's choices were made primarily in keeping with the purpose of creating *The Shining* as a Horror film. One of the key changes relating to length is that of character development, with Jack Torrance in the film emerging much more immediately as a psychotic figure, rather than building slowly and understandably to madness as in the novel. Connected to this is the way that the exaggerated performances by Jack Nicholson (as Jack) and Shelley Duvall (as Jack's wife, Wendy) have been seen by King and others as mere caricature, in contrast to the novel's more complex portrayal.

The film stresses ambiguity in its approach to the supernatural, whereas the novel more explicitly attempts to explain the events of the narrative by suggesting that the Overlook Hotel is indeed haunted. Jack's very personal struggles with alcoholism and his violent past are also downplayed in favour of an examination of the family unit in the film version. An analysis of the character of Dick Halloran, and the changes made (notably his death) allow for a discussion of race alongside class and gender. What Mee contends is really a broader point applied to the film: that a successful adaptation should not be judged on faithfulness to the source material, but on how well a film works on its own merits and in the context of filmic conventions.

"Genre and Themes" is the third chapter in this book, as Mee builds on the points made in relation to adaptation and argues that Kubrick's changes were not made in order to distance the film from the Horror genre, but actually to link it more specifically to Horror *film*. This is argued in terms of intertextual allusions to *The Haunting*, *Psycho*, and *Halloween*, among others. This chapter is highly orientated towards an analysis based on social context and on a direct close reading of

the film itself. It is through this approach that Mee avoids tackling what she sees as a somewhat overbearing weight of theoretical interpretation. She does, however, read the film in the familiar terms of gender, race, and class that dominate contemporary humanities discourse and are indeed justified in understanding *The Shining*, which wears much of this on its sleeve. Mee reads the film as a “kickback to liberal social attitudes” that positions Jack as “a white, male, middle-class monster” (79). In some ways this argument seems too easy and too deceptively straightforward. The novel, certainly, should not be pared down to such a lack of nuance in understanding Jack’s character. On the other hand, what this allows Mee to do is to distinguish the film’s portrayal of Jack from the more sympathetic one of the novel, and to view him more in terms of the Horror movie monster that he might reasonably be seen as. This again works to reinforce the central argument about Kubrick’s engagement with conventions over the faithful adaptation of the novel.

The final chapter focuses on the “Release, Reception, and Cultural Legacy,” noting the mixed critical reception that the film originally received, and the critical reservations about where it sits in film history that have followed. This is interesting and somewhat original in its analysis of promotional material and strategy, critical reception, and box office figures. This works well to complete the book’s contextual reassessment of the film with the benefit of hindsight. It restates some of the reasons for criticism outlined already but also tracks *The Shining’s* influence on later Horror films, which use its techniques, and even comedies, which parody and work within its themes.

This leads effectively toward the conclusion’s lionisation of the film and the argument made for its place specifically within Horror film history. This book’s argument is strongly articulated and well-informed, and although there is undoubtedly a lot more to say about *The Shining*, this would be useful for academic reference, particularly in undergraduate film studies, and is worthwhile reading for anyone interested in the film. It must be said that the book’s production values in terms of binding, layout, and image reproduction are not the highest, but for a book priced for the popular market this is not uncommon in academic publishing. What this provides is a focused and provocative argument that does indeed offer a fresh look at a much-analysed but still not exhausted film.

BIONOTE

Kevin Corstorphine is Lecturer in American Studies at the University of Hull, UK where he teaches mainly on literature modules including American Gothic. His research interests centre on representations of space and place, including haunted houses, tainted and abject spaces, thresholds, and forbidden rooms. He is currently editing a major handbook to Horror literature throughout history, and has published on many authors of the weird and macabre such as Bram Stoker, Ambrose Bierce, H. P. Lovecraft, Robert Bloch, Richard Matheson, Shirley Jackson, Stephen King, and Clive Barker.