

V.F. PERKINS

Understanding and Judging (Horror) Movies

This video essay started as a paper for the conference *Film as Film Today*, at the University of Warwick in 2018. It was one of my early attempts to develop an explicitly evaluative discussion of the horror genre. There is extensive writing that seeks to explain the appeal of horror – from Noël Carroll's *The Philosophy of Horror* (1990) to Anna Bogutskaya's recently published *Feeding the Monster* (2024) – but less that attempts to distinguish more or less effective examples from the genre.

V.F. Perkins provides an approach that embraces evaluation alongside explanation. The subtitle of *Film as Film* (1972), *Understanding and Judging Movies* suggests that, for Perkins, the two activities are closely related and of near-equal importance. The original paper was partly an experiment. I wanted to see what would happen if I brought Perkins' insights 'into contact with some ostensibly un-Perkins films' and what that might mean for the evaluation of horror movies. What I found was that, while there are aspects of horror films to which Perkins' criteria do not straightforwardly apply, his approach remains versatile enough to recognise many significant achievements in the genre.

I have extended the experiment by developing the paper into a video essay. My approach remains investigative. I am not claiming that it is necessary, or even preferable, to adopt



Perkins' perspective when evaluating horror movies. I am interested in how Perkins' work might be useful in relation to horror, but also in the tensions and disjunctions between his critical approach and the genre. Part of my aim was to see if adapting my paper into a different critical medium – the video essay – would bring out different aspects of this encounter between Perkins and horror.

The essay starts by establishing that discussions of horror tend to prioritise explanation over evaluation, and introducing Perkins' perspective as a possible corrective. I also suggest parallels between explanatory approaches that characterise horror in terms of a balance between unpleasantness and containment (e.g. Carroll 1990, Pinedo 1997) and Perkins' emphasis on balance as an aesthetic criterion.

The titles of the next sections, 'Absurd' and 'Obscene', are derived from Perkins' remarks on aesthetic pitfalls avoided in *Johnny Guitar* (Nicholas Ray, 1954) and *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960). Part of the challenge in these sections is distinguishing between horror films that make purposeful use of qualities like disproportion and logical inconsistency, and those in which these qualities are failings. I discuss the death of Sara in *Suspria* (Dario Argento, 1977) and the head explosion in *Scanners* (David Cronenberg, 1981) as examples



of what seem, by Perkins' standards, to be negative tendencies, but are nonetheless valuable in the context of the two movies and, more broadly, the horror genre.

In the final section, titled 'Relationships (!)' after another of Perkins' comments on *Psycho*, I argue that despite subjecting Perkins' criteria to some strain, my examples also indicate the persistent relevance of his approach. The imbalances and disproportions I have noted are usually embedded in larger relationships that give them their own coherence: 'Balance can be suspended on one level, but perhaps offset by different forms of balance at other levels'. Perkins' work indicates the importance of such relationships, whether internal to a film or relating to wider frames of reference.

In adapting my paper, one challenge was the selection of material. I used examples from different styles, periods and international variants of horror, to keep the implicit definition of the genre as broad as possible. However, many of the clips also needed to be immediately recognisable as horror, which meant that violence and gore are perhaps over-represented. This resulted in further complications, such as the inclusion of a relatively large number of depictions of violence against women. I tried to address this, both through the structure of the essay (with the first sustained example, from *Hostel: Part 2*, explicitly framed as a retaliatory response to misogyny) and in the selection of clips, but it is an issue I will have to confront more directly in my subsequent work on horror.

Another challenge was timing. My remarks on several examples were longer than the examples themselves, so the two could not be straightforwardly combined. This required me to find ways to prolong some clips. Shots of Sara in the pit of wire in *Suspiria* are played forwards and backwards; the head explosion in *Scanners* is shown at three different speeds. Having to slow down some examples so that my analysis could 'catch up' prompted me to recall Perkins' description of an important and difficult critical task: 'to articulate in the medium of prose some aspects of what artists have made perfectly and precisely clear in the medium of film.' (1990, 4) An advantage of the video essay format is that it is possible to collect many complex examples from films and display them directly. The accompanying challenge is to ensure that any commentary helps to highlight and clarify these examples, rather than expressing the same meanings less efficiently.

Watch the audiovisual essay here:

<https://vimeo.com/1057449151>

The video contains depictions of violence and nudity, and has been restricted to Mature audiences. To watch the video, you are required to log into Vimeo.

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Works cited

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