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**Cynthia J. Miller and A. Bowdoin Van Riper (eds.),  
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Bride of Frankenstein to Zombieland***

New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016, 272 pages

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**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/inmedia/918>

DOI: 10.4000/inmedia.918

ISSN: 2259-4728

**Publisher**

Center for Research on the English-Speaking World (CREW)

**Electronic reference**

Elizabeth Mullen, « Cynthia J. Miller and A. Bowdoin Van Riper (eds.), *The Laughing Dead: The Horror-Comedy Film from Bride of Frankenstein to Zombieland* », *InMedia* [Online], 6 | 2017, Online since 18 December 2017, connection on 24 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/inmedia/918> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/inmedia.918>

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- <sup>1</sup> *The Laughing Dead* is as hybrid as its subject, covering American and British film and television in a broad manner. Most of the essays here do not delve deeply into film aesthetics or theory, but they do provide a different perspective on both commonly analyzed and lesser-known films. The essays dealing with suburbia and gender are the strongest of the book.
- <sup>2</sup> This collection of sixteen articles explores ways in which comedy and horror subvert generic norms, shattering expectations and forcing audiences to reevaluate established structures. In their introduction, Miller and Van Riper point out that while comedy and horror seem to be at “opposite ends of the dramatic spectrum” (xiv), the former relying on Bergsonian detachment and the latter on visceral engagement, both achieve their desired effects by upending expectations and systematically going against what audiences assume is “supposed to” happen. In the process, comedy-horror films create new spaces where not only generic but also societal norms are called into question.
- <sup>3</sup> *The Laughing Dead* is divided into three main areas of focus: comic subversion of “traditional horror narratives,” (*Playing With Genre*), theoretical perspectives on how

the blending of comedy and horror critiques generic conventions (*Horror, in Theory*) and finally, the effects of “introducing the undead into unexpected settings” (*There Goes the Neighborhood*). The introduction provides a historical overview of how comedy-horror has evolved, from the beginnings of horror cinema into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and summarizes each section clearly and coherently.

- 4 The first section, *Playing With Genre*, focuses on ways in which the articulation of comedy and horror can call into question underlying cultural tensions. Thomas Prasch (3-24) analyses how Polanski’s *The Fearless Vampire Killers* (1967) addresses Central European oppression through comic distancing within the vampire canon. Christina M. Knopf looks at the comic treatment of liminal spaces in horror movies of the 1940s (25-38) in the historical context of a world on the brink of war, specifically through the use of doors as “tropes of undead horror” (xix), while Steven Webley traces the heritage of George A. Romero’s zombie films in British “ZomComs” *Shaun of the Dead* and the series *Dead Set* (39-58), reading both as “a redoubling of post-ideological cynicism” (51). Gary Rhodes posits New York City as an oneiric, vampiric force in the Reagan-era horror-comedy *The Vampire’s Kiss* (1988) starring Nicholas Cage (59-70). In a distinct departure from the other chapters of the first section, Eric César Moralès (71-83) looks at how the animated children’s movie *The Book of Life* (2014) combines a storyline focused on death with traditional animated film techniques (bright colors, goofy sidekicks, a catchy soundtrack) to neutralize anxieties stemming from the fear of death.
- 5 In the book’s second section, *Horror, in Theory*, each essay explores the effects of consciously injecting humor into horror narratives. Murray Leeder (87-101) bases his observations on the *œuvre* of the “Abominable Showman,” gimmick film king William Castle. Leeder’s main point is that there is no intrinsic opposition between comedy and horror, and that Castle’s “Cinema of Attractions” approach allowed contemporary audiences to revel in the extreme and the abject, eliminating the barrier between on- and offscreen sensation through gimmickry (skeletons flying over theater audiences, select vibrating seats, etc.) and direct address. Martin Norden (102- 120) does not break new ground in his essay on humor in *The Bride of Frankenstein* (Whale, 1935), but he coherently outlines how Whale laces his sequel with over-the-top performances, Hollywood in-jokes and thinly-veiled winks at “non-mainstream sexuality and aberrant procreation” (117). In her essay on *Abbot and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (121-137), Deborah Carmichael refreshingly analyzes the way the comic duo’s antics blend with the horror genre to question contemporary gender roles and reflect unresolved postwar anxieties. Mary Hallah’s article on humor in vampire films (138-153) firmly roots the modern vampire comedy in the gothic horror tradition, underscoring how comic elements mediate the tension arising from vampiric liminality and blur the boundaries between good and evil, familiar and other. Lisa Cunningham draws on Barbara Creed and Mary Ann Doane in her analysis of queerness and the undead female monster (154-168). She convincingly argues that the “othering” of the queer female protagonists through (un)death specifically in a *comedy* horror film creates a space in which to reconsider the ways mainstream culture condemns queer women as monstrous. By focusing on comic yet disturbing portrayals of monstrous female violence, Cunningham demonstrates how “disturbing the mask of femininity” (159) subverts traditional social structures and gender norms. In the final essay of this section, Chris Yogerst examines the importance of the genre-savvy audience to the success of *Zombieland* (2009) in his “Rules for Surviving a Horror Comedy” (169-184),

placing it within the self-reflexive comedy-horror canon alongside *Young Frankenstein* and *Scream*.

- 6 The five essays of the book's last section, *There Goes The Neighborhood*, analyze how horror comedies critique contemporary issues of consumer culture, class, and gender. In his analysis of Andrew Currie's 2006 "zomcom" *Fido* (187-200), Michael C. Reiff examines how the film exposes the implications of incorporating zombies into society as consumable products and symbols of middle-class upward mobility. As can be expected, Reiff references George Romero's *Dead* films, particularly *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) and, from a gender perspective, Savini's 1990 remake of *Night of the Living Dead*. Reiff sees the zombie as a conceit for macho masculinities; more problematically, he reads *Fido*'s female protagonist's purchase of a zombie as a subversion of patriarchy from within consumer culture; he also draws parallels between zombie commodification and propagandistic treatment of the Japanese during World War II. In his article on *Ghostbusters* (1984, 1989) (201-214), A. Bowdoin Van Riper leaves the suburbs for the Big Apple, detailing how the eponymous Ghostbusters of the 1980s are comically portrayed as cogs in the service economy of a city whose inhabitants view the ghost outbreak as just another inconvenience of city life — up until the final battle, where they pull together to defeat the (ridiculous) enemy. Van Riper points out how this "Nobody messes with my city" attitude plays differently to a post-9/11, post-Paris, London, and Boston terrorist attacks audience. Across the pond, Shelley Rees focuses her analysis (215-226) of British cult favorite "ZomRomCom" *Shaun of the Dead* (Wright, 2004) on both the portrayal of low-paid workers in Western cities as "practically zombies anyway" and on the queering of heteronormative masculinity. The last two articles of the section deal respectively with teaching tolerance through undead characters in children's films (227-242) and with the democratization of the Frankenstein myth (243-257). In the latter, the author draws attention to the creators' "everyman" status in films like *Frankenweenie* (1984), *Weird Science* (1985), *Frankenhooker* (1990) and *Rock 'n' Roll Frankenstein* (1999) but there is no specific analysis of the role comedy plays. In the former, suburban conformity is both criticized and ridiculed: outcasts (living and undead) expose the zombie-like lifelessness of conformist society and the zest of living outside the norm.
- 7 Continuing the work they began in *Undead in the West: Vampires, Zombies, Mummies and Ghosts on the Cinematic Frontier* (2012) and *Undead in the West II: They Just Keep Coming* (2013), Miller and Van Riper provide an uneven but compelling overview of the comedy-horror film in *The Laughing Dead*.

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## AUTHOR

ELIZABETH MULLEN

Université de Bretagne Occidentale, Brest