**Book Review**

**Postcinematic Movie Culture**

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**Contemplating Phenomenology of Spectatorship in the Era of Cinema’s Economic Obsolescence**

*Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens – Video Spectatorship From VHS to File Sharing*

by Caetlin Benson-Allott. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013. 312 pages.

$34.95, paperback.

The title sequence of Sean Cunningham’s Friday the 13th (1980) becomes a “salutation to home viewers”[[1]](#endnote-1) as the cheap slasher genre’s clichéd emulation of a screen tearing is superseded by the novel, special effects glass-shattering of a ‘would-be’ and ‘soon-to-be’ television set. The familiar discursive frame of the motion picture itself is shattered in heralding the advent of the VCR. Caetlin Benson-Allott contends that this innovative assault on the viewer reaches beyond issues of theme and aesthetics to present its greatest challenge on how video has redefined cinema-centric (‘cinecentric’) traditions of motion picture spectatorship. *Killer Tapes…* outlines a compelling challenge to certain poststructuralist conceptions of spectatorship (primarily those formulated by Christian Metz, Jean-Louis Baudry and Laura Mulvey), as Benson-Allott argues, that the relationship of spectator and apparatus have radically changed in light of the proliferation of video distribution. Benson-Allott regards these poststructuralist theories as having restricted many avenues in the discursive infrastructure of spectatorship. Apparatus theory’s ‘misdirection’ is exemplified by Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytically-informed ‘trappings’ of the spectator in a sub-motor, hyperperceptive state where the semiotics of spectatorship are subsumed by the mechanics of spectatorship. Benson-Allott argues for a departure from ‘cinecentricity’ and toward understanding the prerecorded video as the dominant apparatus. Film studies has a compulsion toward creating obituaries for cinema[[2]](#endnote-2) and then clinging to cinema as the dominant apparatus model[[3]](#endnote-3) because the film industry itself relies on “planned obsolescence”[[4]](#endnote-4). For Benson-Allott, *Killer Tapes…* fills a gap in theorizing the apparatus and its subject-effects, as she regards video, new media and platform studies to have not intervened in this particular area (10).

Benson-Allott launches an inquiry into how home video exhibition, both formally and narratively, creates new stories for new audiences. She posits video as a new discursive norm of motion picture production as opposed to being an ancillary format. *Killer Tapes…* provides an effective interrogation, through textual analysis, toward linking a movie’s style, tone and politics with its construction of unique video spectators. Benson-Allott is successful in positioning the video spectator into a postcinematic landscape and formulating many of the features of the postcinematic movie culture. I suggest that Benson-Allott’s selection for the textual analysis presents certain limitations to completing a survey of the postcinematic landscape. She intentionally focuses her textual analysis on movies which are shaped by their technological characteristics and cultural reception. To that end, she focuses on a shorter list of movies within those parameters which are modified by their themes of cultural anxiety. Perhaps Benson-Allott is guided by Foucauldian concepts of emergence[[5]](#endnote-5) in discursive formations, however, her acknowledgement that the movies selected all rise out of B-market films potentially presents a limitation to her findings.[[6]](#endnote-6) Benson-Allott rightly recognizes the limitations she sets up when qualifying her selections as being guided by her own viewing habits and issues of taste (18). That being said, there are sound justifications for her selections – horror/thriller movies are apt at interrogating contemporaneous shifts in motion picture technology and ‘low genres’ do political work in spectatorial training which A-pictures often reject (17, 21). *Killer Tapes…,* is challenged in providing a full view of the postcinematic movie landscape, yet Benson-Allott can be praised for structuring a compelling discursive network from her selections. The textual analyses become exemplary case studies in formulating the experience of spectatorship in the ‘first postcinematic era’. The potency of her arguments are sustained through the rigour of her theoretical critiques.

The first chapter of *Killer Tapes…*, “Distributing the Dead”, examines director George Romero’s altered presentation of the same subject for different popular distribution platforms (28). Through in-depth formal analysis of six of Romero’s zombie movies, Benson-Allott provides evidence for how movies construct video and cinematic spectators differently. The great depth of field in Night of the Living Dead (1968) and the panoramic tableaux of Dawn of the Dead (1978) (as films) are compared with a marked shift to shallow and rack focus cinematography starting with Day of the Dead (1985) when short theatrical runs was becoming a prelude for expansive video distribution. Benson-Allott argues that where clashing of deep focus cinematography (verisimilitude) and photographic stillness (illusion) create viewer skepticism and isolationism in Night of the Living Dead, close shot scale in Day of the Dead collapses space and creates intimacy highly conducive to home exhibition. New kinds of viewers are interpellated[[7]](#endnote-7) and Benson-Allott works to marry stylistic systems with political valence that can explain this effect in constructing particular kinds of viewing subjects as technological modes of distribution/exhibition changed. In 2005, Land of the Dead shifts color systems in Romero’s movies from sharp juxtapositional contrasts for Technicolor filming in 1978 and muted tones for television exhibition in 1985 to digitally filtered schema that effectively meld the diegetic universe with the perceptual universe of spectators. Benson-Allott notes that video has shifted media reception into a kind of media creation which recalls Roland Barthes’s “death of the author” in explaining the relationship of semiotics and hermeneutics to texts.[[8]](#endnote-8) For Benson-Allott, different distribution regimes produce different movies while video demands a democratic distribution that imagines neo-liberal spectators. For Benson-Allott, cinema is not dead, but the Metzian spectator certainly is, affirming a first postcinematic era and its new video spectator.

In Chapter 2, “Addressing the ‘New Flesh’”, Benson-Allott argues that David Cronenberg’s Videodrome (1983) imagines video spectatorship as constructed into an unstable form. For Benson-Allott, video spectatorship identifies the body as both material and televisual – a liminal nature which challenges apparatus theory’s discrete layers of identification[[9]](#endnote-9). She argues that this liminal nature creates dynamic spatiotemporality for spectator construction which renders the spectator active, and not passive. This “technopenetrated universe” alters historically-based modes of identification. Conventional gender binaries which determine particular meanings for ‘feminization’ or ‘heteronormativity’ take on radically new meanings while new modes of meaning-production in discourse create a new phenomenology of spectatorship. Videodrome demonstrates video penetration as media imperialism and how its connection to autonomy of the ‘body as national/globalized’ acts to constructs a unique video spectator. Benson-Allott concludes that Videodrome uses the apparatus playfully in order to challenge transcendental subject positions and reinforce uncanny spatiotemporality of the technopenetrated universe – a universe where video creates non-cinematic spatiotemporal coordinates for its spectator. I would suggest this argument as the acme of *Killer Tapes…*’s power to critique film studies’s poststructuralist apparatus theory.

Chapter 3 of *Killer Tapes…*, “Reprotechnophobia”, examines how Gore Verbinski’s The Ring (2002) represents a disavowal of video spectators who cannot suture the psychological rupture created through experiencing shifting platforms of media and technological interfaces. Benson-Allott’s arguments about ‘technological amnesia’ resemble those of Fredric Jameson and Andreas Huyssen.[[10]](#endnote-10) Video spectatorship is permeated by deep anxieties related to ‘technological amnesia’ which unconsciously drive spectators toward disavowing obsolete formats and fetishizing current ones. For Benson-Allott, anxieties exist in the spectator’s knowledge that the current viewing format will also become obsolete. The self is threatened with a dilemma of presence/absence in their spectatorship. This moment of ‘technological uncanny’ renders spectators aware of excesses in signification for the video. The effect is that the hermeneutic system is open. For Benson-Allott, these assertions support *Killer Tapes…*’s general challenge of Baudrian and Metzian concepts of spectatorship which fix signification within the limits of the screen’s frame and the spectator’s perceptual knowledge of the diegetic world of a film and act to close the hermeneutics of spectatorship.[[11]](#endnote-11) Chapter 4 of *Killer Tapes…*, “Going, Going, Grindhouse”, introduces the concept of ‘cinematicity’ which claims that cinema lives on discursively without the exhibition architecture of traditional cinema. Cinematicity is an ‘aura’, which Benson-Allott defines through Deleuzian concepts of simulacrum. Benson-Allott argues that, “cinema is now discursively constructed by video technology” (134) which renders cinema to simulacra and defines movie culture as postcinematic. Cinema becomes an ancillary role in the business of home video, according to Benson-Allott. This chapter uses Quentin Tarantino’s Grindhouse (2007) to demonstrate that simulacra effects in the movie expose the apparatus and thus interpellate spectators into a postcinematic context.

Chapter 5, “Paranormal Spectatorship” examines ‘faux footage’ horror movies and their construction of a pirate spectator. For Benson-Allott, the death of the diegetic videographer in these movies is both a condemnation of P2P file sharing and a mode for interpellating the spectator as pirate. I suggest contra Benson-Allott that deaths of diegetic videographers can act as ‘pleasure-points’ for spectators – survivors of murder, artful dodgers of castigation, downloaders flying free… and pirates with booty that will not be taxed.[[12]](#endnote-12) *Killer Tapes…* is a fascinating book with rigourous theoretical content and effective challenges to entrenched modes of thinking about movie spectatorship. Benson-Allott outlines a new phenomenology of spectatorship, but this reader is left with important questions regarding certain denials of intent[[13]](#endnote-13) and limits in surveying the postcinematic landscape and in defining a postcinematic movie culture. In this sense, *Killer Tapes…* finds its ideal readership in those who are eager to further Benson-Allott’s own ideas and help to scope-out the full field of postcinematic movie culture.

1. It would become a direct hailing a few years after the theatrical release of Cunningham’s film as at the time of its release only 1% of US homes owned a VCR (1) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See Paulo Cherchi Usai’s “The Death of Cinema” (also Jon Lewis and Peter Greenaway) (7-8) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. This protectionist impulse of film studies could be explained through Benson-Allott’s text as being based in a disavowal or in a form of pragmatism. However, I take her to rely on Foucauldian concepts of discourse to explain the phenomenon as being based in openness toward developing ontological theories of cinema specifically. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Benson-Allott borrows the term ‘planned obsolescence’ from Bernard Logan. It can be assumed that Benson-Allott is also guided by Moore’s Law and its historical realization in the age of postmodern technological development. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See Michel Foucault’s *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (41) Chp. 3 – The Formation of Objects [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. In fact, her rationale (15-16) recalls Lev Kuleshov’s rationale when selecting theatres and screenings to visit for understanding what makes a film ‘popular’. Issues of inhibition, neurosis and anxiety all guided that selection process. See Lev Kuleshov’s *Art of the Cinema* (41-55) [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Benson-Allott appears to employ the term directly from Louis Althusser’s “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Toward an Investigation” [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See Roland Barthes’s *The Rustle of Language* (49-55) [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Primary and secondary identification as formulated by Christian Metz in *The Imaginary Signifier* [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. See Fredric Jameson’s *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* and Andreas Huyssen’s *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. I’m generally basing this on my knowledge of Metz and Baudry’s formulation of the Transcendental Subject as ‘surrogate’ for the spectator’s conscious-perceptual experience of films. See Jean-Louis Baudry’s “Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematic Apparatus” [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. That being said, the Dickensian Artful Dodger is eventually caught and presumably punished. See Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Benson-Allott is adamant in her subscribing to the tenets of the intentional fallacy as it applies to historiographic and theoretical modes of deduction and induction. Tom Savini’s ‘intent’ to have the zombie makeup grey and not blue does not persuade her arguments, nor does Sean Cunningham’s possible intention of making the opening sequence to Friday the 13th a screen-shattering one. Those examples are not problematic per se, but when discussing Grindhouse there seems to be a general overlooking of how Quentin Tarantino’s ‘pastiche style’ acts to mould the experience of the ‘cinematic’ effects in the digitally-produced movie. The textual analysis of the movie tends to deny that Tarantino’s stylistics determine aesthetics and thus spectator perceptions. This is only to mention that there may be a pervasive ‘synergy’ in operation with Grindhouse as it concerns intentional pastiche elements as possible causation for an integral aspect of those simulacra effects. The ‘problem’ is that if Tarantino’s intentions can be found significant in the formation of his stylistic system then Grindhouse could be understood as fitting into postcinematic discourse in a different way than is presented by Benson-Allott. Just a thought for now. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)