The sketches and characters have the quality of caricature, but it is not meanly executed. The jokes are good-tempered, and even the most venal characters have their charm. It helps, of course, that the film’s humor is broad right from the start, as is clear from the moment that the ad man approves a large display studded with expensive electric lights for a program on energy conservation.

The film was made from Tabio’s hit stage play, which used the same central concept to create a kind of teatro buffo, full of slapstick and comic overkill. Tabio translated it to the screen with the support of master director Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, whose *The Survivors* is a kind of precursor, a black comedy of aristocrats who wall themselves into their mansion when the revolution comes to Cuba. The film version of *Se Permuta* is an innovative mix of naturalism and formal play with the medium, welding sitcom to commedia dell’arte.

Tabio used the skills he mastered in documentary work to give a down-to-earth (or at least down-to-ground-floor) feel to the film, and it is rich in throwaway moments of atmosphere—for instance, the opening shots of men in a working-class neighborhood who are girlwatching. His script allows the actors to build character into the action, and the performances, especially that of Fornés, are excellent. He has deployed cinematic techniques to bring in the buffo element. The camera becomes a commentator, with wipes and freeze frames punctuating the plot. The sound track creates its own rhythm and commentary. Saturday-morning-like cartoon music signals the ludicrous, and at one point the sound track chipmunkizes the mother’s voice as she rattles on about domestic bliss and consumer heaven.

Tabio even goes so far as to stop frames and write cartoon balloons full of comments on them. The film process itself performs the comic exaggeration that actors did in the theater. And so *Se Permuta* gives viewers a two-for-one deal—a plausible set of characters and a cartoon comedy of manners. It’s a mark of Tabio’s control that you both get the socially critical jokes and also care about the fate of the lovers.

With his bold use of techniques that call attention to the form itself, Tabio turns the viewer into a co-conspirator. At one point, for instance, our hero tries to hail a taxi, always a rare item in Havana. When one not only stops immediately but the driver agrees to go far across town, the hero is so surprised that he does a double take and shrugs into the camera. During the umpteenth housing swap, one of the characters watches a popular Cuban TV show, in which a critic analyzes current film in a genial but sober style. On the TV we see the well-known critic faulting *Se Permuta* itself, for repeating its own joke too many times.

Tabio makes comedy look easy, and *Se Permuta* has the bite that comedy—which thrives on topicality and opposition to received wisdom—has at its best. He has reclaimed the sitcom form for a self-critical film style, and marked himself as a director to watch.

—PAT AUFDERHEIDE

## Books

### DREADFUL PLEASURES

**An Anatomy of Modern Horror**


This critical survey of the horror film may be the best recent introduction to the genre, touching as it does on so many of the cultural origins of the fantastic. Twitchell, a professor of English at the University of Florida, Gainesville, takes pains to explain the connections of the contemporary genre to the engravings of Hogarth, *The Castle of Otranto*, Goya, Fuseli, as well as to Mary Shelley, Robert Louis Stevenson, Bram Stoker, and other key figures.
of the gothic tradition. Conscious of the currency of Marx and Freud as critical tools with which to approach the genre, he chooses the latter (with Jungian/anthropological variations) for his model of explanation. His introduction and critical method are sensible and well-supported, but his reiteration of Freud's notion of the unheimlich hardly seems timely at this date, nor does Twitchell's variation on Todorov's interpretation of the uncanny.

Twitchell is careful to define and distinguish between the concepts of "horror" and "terror," an exercise central to an understanding of the book, but a labored one for those looking for an interpretation constituting new knowledge. Twitchell associates "horror" with unnameable, primordial fears (represented in the genre by vampires, werewolves, and similar "shape-shifters") associated with childhood and adolescent sexuality; "terror," on the other hand, is fear linked to that which can be known and defined (psychopathic killers, scientific mutations, etc.). The author's approach here, while always erudite and entertaining, is troublesome on several counts. He frequently lapses into a casual tone, freely using collective pronouns ("Our response will be . . ."); "We know where it came from . . .") with little apparent attention to the methodological traps he sets for himself regarding questions of audience perception of the image and of a work's precise social context. His suppositions regarding the definability of psycho killers seem undercut by various passages (especially his final chapter) demonstrating that these manifestations of the monstrous are not only part of the horrific dimension (as the author defines it) but clearly dominant in the genre of the seventies and eighties. Moreover, films from Psycho to The Texas Chainsaw Massacre to The Shining debunk the science of psychoanalysis as a means of understanding crisis; they also deride the whole notion of "knowing" anything, thus placing the pathological criminal in the same realm, it would appear, as the archetypal spectres of the nightmare—a situation the author obliquely acknowledges. Twitchell argues that as the horrific becomes more predominant in the psychopathology of modern life, archetypal monsters of gothicism and primitive myth become transmuted into the schizophrenics (a term the author uses rather freely) of the current horror genre. The contradictions Twitchell creates for himself do not seem resolved, however, by the equation of Travis Bickle in Taxi Driver with Mr. Hyde.

Also problematical is Twitchell's attempt to distinguish horror from science-fiction. He opts (sensibly) for the term cinéfantastique to cover both genres, realizing the amount of thematic overlap to which the forms are subject, but his rather lengthy exegesis of the uncanny elements in Forbidden Planet (which he labels "science-fiction horror") is a bit exasperating, especially given his distinct tongue-in-cheek tone while describing the film's self-consciously Freudian themes. Regarding the science fiction issue there are a few other questionable areas, including most obviously Twitchell's association of "big bugs with teeth" with ax-murderers (in his "terror" definition), and his comment that "our" interest in these big bugs was a sixties preoccupation (certainly he is referring to the sci-fi mutants of the atom-age fifties). The basic problem here is Twitchell's failure to separate clearly the principal tenets of science fiction from the realm of the fantastic he feels informs the horror film.

Since Twitchell delimits his definition of the horrific to archetypal nightmare figures, the bulk of the text becomes, predictably, a discussion of Frankenstein, Dracula, Dr. Jekyll/the Wolfman (the shape-shifters) and their progeny; Freud holds sway throughout, particularly Totem and Taboo and incest theory, along with more general notions of the genre acting as a safety valve for bottled-up wish-dreams of the spectator. Twitchell makes a nice comment on the Phantom of the Opera figuring as the older man, hidden within the depths of a structure (read, of course, the unconscious) who desires and is temporarily desired by a young girl—one would be hard pressed to find a handier Oedipal model.

Despite the narrowness of some of Twitchell's definitions and a resultant confusion and traveling over well-trod ground, this book is graceful, sophisticated, and engaging. The author's comprehensive knowledge of the genre and the organization of his work make this an important contribution from a pedagogical standpoint; a book on the horror genre with this kind of usefulness is a rare commodity. —CHRISTOPHER SHARRETT