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The Genre of Police

Travis Linnemann, *The Horror of Police*, University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 2022; 279 pp.: ISBN 9781517905927, $24.95 (pbk).

Reviewed by: Theodore Martin, *University of California, Irvine*

Stories about cops are a genre unto themselves. You know the formula: the crime is solved, the perpetrator punished, the victim avenged, order restored. But what if we've been thinking about the genre of the police all wrong? That is the question that powers Travis Linnemann's excellent new book, *The Horror of Police*. In it, Linnemann argues that to understand the past and present of policing in American society, we need to read the story of the police differently: not as a story of laws, rules, and procedures (the classic tale of police professionalization and bureaucratization since the 1950s), but as a horror story.

To this end, Linnemann's book offers itself as an experiment in strategic misreading. What would happen, Linnemann asks, if we were to "purposefully misread" everyday police stories—in films, television shows, novels, press coverage, and police blogs—as if they were horror stories (42)? Doing so, he argues, reveals how even the most celebratory or banal representation of cops can't help but index the monstrous violence that underwrites the institution of modern policing. This argument alone is worth the price of admission, as Linnemann weaves together an adventurous and wide-ranging archive of fiction and nonfiction—from RoboCop to the "cannibal cop" Gilberto Valle—that testifies to the barely submerged horror of policing. Yet Linnemann's main argument has a twist, and a more complicated and vexing question turns out to haunt *The Horror Police*: if policing really is so monstrous, why is this a monster that so many people seem unable to see?

This question gives us a better idea of what Linnemann means by horror, and why he thinks the concept can so usefully explain American culture's relation to the police. On one level, of course, the horror genre is about bearing witness to scenes of monstrous violence—a feature that makes it especially well-suited for describing a world in which horrific images of police violence are ceaselessly broadcast back to us. Yet at a deeper level, Linnemann argues, the defining characteristic of horror fiction is really the way it stages a "confrontation with the unthinkable" (p. 8). Horror is about confronting a monster whose basic reality you can't quite bring yourself to believe in. In this way, horror offers a powerful allegory not simply for the monstrosity of the police but for the difficulty we have in acknowledging that monstrosity. There is the horror of what the police do, and there is the further horror of being forced to admit that you actually see it.

For Linnemann, horror names the well-nigh existential dread involved in keeping a terrible truth at bay. Horror, you could say, is the dialectical experience of refusing to believe in the violence that's happening right before your eyes. What, then, are the narrative forms that make this

refusal possible? Put simply, what kinds of stories do we tell ourselves about policing in order to avoid having to tell it as a horror story?

The five chapters of Linnemann's book serve as answers to this question, as they survey the range of narrative frameworks and generic conventions that prop up policing in the popular imagination. Moving from the horror story to the apocalypse narrative to the technological dystopia to the fiction of siege, these chapters expertly reveal the feedback loop that runs between popular culture, ideologies of policing, and the self-conception of the police themselves. If *The Horror of Police* thus turns out to be concerned with more than just horror stories, this is because its broader ambition is to document how a wide variety of police genres work to distract us from, even as they can't help but disclose, policing's essential horror.

Chapter 1, "Bad Cops and True Detectives," uncovers the horror at the heart of stories about bad cops—which are of course stories about cops performing precisely the kinds of violent, extralegal acts that are endemic to policing as an institution. Drawing on films like *Bad Lieutenant* and *Training Day* and television series like *Dexter* and *True Detective*, Linnemann brilliantly demonstrates that the bad cop story is really a horror story, in the sense that it expresses the "unthinkable" truth about police that we know deep down but can't fully acknowledge: that all cops are "bad" cops, and that police violence is not so much the exception as it is the rule.

Chapter 2, "The Police at the End of the World, or The Political Theology of the Thin Blue Line," asks why police are always some of the first characters to reappear in apocalyptic narratives. Linnemann argues that these kinds of narratives reveal the way policing has made itself central to the ideology of "civilized" liberal democracy, as police present themselves as the last line of defense against social disorder and civilizational breakdown.

Chapter 3, "RoboCop, or Modern Prometheus," shifts from the post-apocalyptic to the dystopian in order to take up arguments about what is often called police militarization—a concept that Linnemann argues is more productively understood through the lens of the long history of the relation between policing and technology. Here Linnemann considers dystopian science fiction films like *The Terminator*, *Minority Report*, and *RoboCop*, masterfully reading depictions of robotic policing as an allegory for the "robotic adherence to task" that is expressed in the unfeeling, inhuman violence perpetrated by police who inevitably claim they are "just doing their job" (127).

Chapter 4, "Monsters Are Real," turns from the horror of policing to "the figure of the frightened, horrified police" (154), showing how confessions of fear by the police work to shore up police power. Ranging from Ed McBain's 1954 novel *Cophater* to Body Count's 1992 song "Cop Killer" to the cinematic genre of the siege narrative (think *Assault on Precinct 13*), Linnemann demonstrates the importance of generalized public fear as an affect harnessed to justify police violence. Fear, Linnemann reminds us, is not merely a feeling; it's a strategy for making us feel that we can't live without the police.

So what does it look like when we *do* try to live without police? This is the more directly sociological question taken up in the book's fifth and final chapter, "The Unthinkable World." Inspired by the protests that followed the murder of George Floyd and the unexpected emergence of arguments for police abolition into the mainstream, this chapter is not, for all of that, a happy ending. Instead, Linnemann spotlights some of the ways that even leftist attempts to imagine a world without police in places like Portland and Seattle have failed, or succeeded only by

replicating the violence of police power. "Even the most radical police critic," Linnemann cautions, "risks falling victim to the logic of police" (215).

But why is that? Why is the "logic of police" so liable to reinfect those who critique it? And what might this have to do with the overlapping meanings of horror—the horror of violence, the horror of repressed truth, the horror of that truth's unveiling—that shape the cultural logic of policing? Linnemann is hardly wrong to point out the flaws of cop-free zones and the limitations of defund-the-police calls, and he is earnest in his hope that the shortcomings of such projects offer important lessons for abolitionists today. Here, though, I wished Linnemann had more explicitly circled back to the concept of horror, which does fall out of view occasionally, and especially in the book's conclusion. How does horror, or those other horror-adjacent, disaster-fueled genres of policing, help us explain the imaginative, conceptual, and even practical challenges involved in creating a world without police?

Even if questions like these are left lingering, *The Horror of Police* remains an absolutely essential addition both to the scholarship on cultural representations of policing and to the activist literature on police abolition. In every horror movie there comes a moment when even the most thoroughgoing skeptic (usually a scientist or an academic) is forced to admit: the monster is real. In our current world that is not a horror movie but too often feels like it could be, reading *The Horror of Police* is pretty much that moment. Linnemann's book is an eye-opening cultural history of all the ways we work to convince ourselves that policing isn't monstrous, and an urgent reminder of the fact that nothing will change until we admit that it is.

Judah Schept, *Coal, Cages, Crisis*. NYU Press: New York, 2022; 328 pp. ISBN 9781479858972, $32 (pbk).

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Judah Schept's *Coal, Cages, Crisis* has one primary goal: to explain why new prisons are being built on former mountain top removal coal mines. Schept's exceptional methodology explores this phenomenon in light of the history of the Appalachian coal industry, the war on poverty and drugs, and mass incarceration.

At the heart of this book's inquisition about the connected trends of coal mining and mass incarceration is an ongoing effort to build a federal prison in Letcher County, Kentucky. If built, this prison will be the ninth prison in Eastern Kentucky, but community members, local organizations, and national legal groups have put up a strong fight against the prison since it was first proposed a decade ago. Most simply, the Letcher County proposal is a case of local elites recruiting a federal prison contract in the name of revitalizing regional economies, securing federal funding for social service providers like hospitals and schools, and enriching themselves along the way. The first official proposal for the United States Penitentiary (USP) Letcher was released in 2013, and it eventually received a $444 million appropriation from the federal government. After constant opposition through years of public comment and agency reviews, the Bureau of Prisons withdrew the proposal in 2019. This struggle is a prescient application of Schept's insights about