

Less Punk, More Splatter: Heavy Metal, Horror Video, and the Literary Nasties of Shaun Hutson

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IN BRITAIN IN THE 1980s, THE BOOKS OF HORROR NOVELIST, SHAUN Hutson, were outsold only by those of Stephen King and James Herbert (Gilbert 76). Yet, despite his success, Hutson's work has never received extensive scholarly appraisal. When Hutson's work is mentioned in academic writing, it is usually in passing, often to indicate a scholar's awareness of broader goings-on in British horror fiction, before they proceed to analyse the work of Hutson's revered contemporaries, the so-called "pillars" of British horror fiction (Shaar Murray 39): James Herbert, Clive Barker, and Ramsey Campbell (Brown "Working-class horror"; Freeman; Joshi; Ní Fhlainn; Spark; Tudor). Even in Grady Hendrix's *Paperbacks from Hell: The Twisted History of '70s and '80s Horror Fiction*, which for all intents and purposes is a comprehensive work, Hutson's oeuvre is all but ignored beyond the inclusion of several book cover illustrations (including on the cover of *Paperbacks from Hell* itself).

The reticence of academics and historians of popular culture to engage with Hutson's output is due, at least in part, to the literary value his novels are said to lack, and the disdain directed towards him by his peers. Clive Barker, for example, is alleged to have referred to Hutson's work as "irresponsible" (Davis 12), while decorated horror

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novelist, Ramsey Campbell, has accused Hutson on more than one occasion of having “dragged horror writing into the gutter” (Hutson qtd. in Nicholls 5). Hutson’s crude writing style, his propensity to dwell on extreme forms of violence, and his unwillingness to use horror as a genre through which to allegorise contemporary Britain in a manner comparable to Herbert, Barker, and Campbell, has led Barker’s former editor, Andy McKillop, to describe the author’s books as “sick”: “They’re not redeemed by any vision of humanity. They splatter and splash gore as well as any other novel, but that’s all” (McKillop qtd. in Davis 12). Perversely, the reasons for Hutson’s dismissal within British horror circles are also given by chroniclers of the so-called “splatterpunk” literary movement, a largely American phenomenon, yet one that Herbert and Barker are routinely written into (Sammon), and whose authors “aimed to shock, generally through displays of corporeal transgression encompassing anything from extreme mutilation and transformation to mutation or severe body modification and graphic sex” (Aldana Reyes 28-9). Hutson is typically peripheralized in such accounts. Again, this is because Hutson fails (or rather, refuses) to adopt the proclivity for subversion—the *punk* of “splatterpunk”—of splatterpunk authors such as Craig Spector, John Skipp, and David J. Schow (Skipp 03:19; Sammon 292).

The ensuing analysis of Hutson’s 1980s oeuvre offers a counternarrative to current understandings of “extreme” horror writing during the decade (Sammon), and of British horror fiction in particular. Hutson revels in the surface-level pleasures of 1980s consumerism as a fan of hard rock and horror films, and embraces the “Thatcherite-induced consumer culture” that the aforementioned authors sought to challenge (Egan 57).

Hutson in Context

Hutson’s work from the 1980s grew from so-called “nasties,” a sub-genre of horror fiction initiated in Britain by the publication of James Herbert’s *The Rats*, which was published by New English Library (NEL) in 1974 (Freeman “A Decadent Appetite” 84). For academic, Simon Brown, *The Rats* and Herbert’s follow-up, *The Fog*, “revolutionised” the genre. Along with the work of Stephen King that emerged around the same time and from the same publisher, Herbert’s writing

signalled a break from the Victorian aristocratic moralising of Dennis Wheatley, who, as Brown argues, “was by far the most popular horror writer in Britain in the early 1970s” (Brown “Working-class horror” 278).

The Rats, by comparison, is set in contemporary London, confronts issues pertaining to class, poverty, and homelessness, and emerged just as socially-charged, British filmmakers such as Pete Walker and Gary Sherman—Influenced by developments in US horror following the runaway success of films such as *Last House on the Left* (1972) and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) were challenging what Steve Chibnall has described as Hammer’s “tired gothic product” (Chibnall), with horror films set in the present day, such as *House of Whipcord* (1974) and *Death Line* (1972). *The Rats*, through social engagement, and crucially, as Aldana Reyes argues, “by emphasising the affective potential of explicit descriptions of mutilation and death” (29), brought British horror fiction up to date, similar to how the work of Walker, Sherman, and others did for cinema. Figure 1.



FIGURE 1. Examples of “literary nasties”. Image credit: Popular Film and Television Archive. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Inevitably, a string of *Rats* imitators followed, leading to something of a pulp fiction renaissance, with many new authors emerging with books modelled on Herbert's debut. There were books about killer cats, dogs, spiders, maggots, worms, cockroaches, locusts, bats, ants, and other menaces, all of which had "basic plots" and were "very explicit in sex and gore" (Smith, *Writing Horror Film*, 11-12). "It was a boom industry within the industry," late horror novelist, Guy N. Smith, recalled (whose own effort *Night of the Crabs* had "IN THE TRADITION OF THE RATS" emblazoned on its cover), with "virtually every original paperback publisher [fighting] for a stake in the lucrative market" (Smith, *Writing Horror Fiction*, 11-12).

Throughout the 1980s, horror paperbacks like these were highly visible on the British high-street. There were occasions when mainstream bookstores such as WH Smith refused to stock particular titles—this happened to *The Rats*, *Night of the Crabs*, Hutson's *Chain-saw Terror* and others—but such books were otherwise pervasive and available from an abundance of retail outlets from newsagents to railway stations, where sales were driven by commuters and other passers-by. The number of horror novels published at this time reflected a broader effort across the publishing industry to maximize profits from slimline (novels rarely exceeded 40,000 words), affordable, soft-covers in a host of genres, which meant publishing more books, and crucially, identifying new authors to turn out genre fiction quickly. As a journalist writing for the British music magazine, *Q*, argued in 1987, publishers were, in essence, "throwing mud at the wall" and investing in that which stuck (Housham 40). The horror genre proved particularly adhesive.

Hutson, as a very young author, and for a time, the youngest working writer in Europe, emerged from this context, publishing his first horror novel in 1982, *The Skull*, with Hamlyn: one of NEL's rivals, and the only to use "Nasty" as a generic marker on the reverse of some of its horror titles (e.g. *Parasite* by Richard Lewis). Hutson's break-through work, however, was *Slugs*, published later that year by WH Allen/Star, when Hutson was just 24 years old. For Guy N. Smith, the book "opened up new realms of revulsion" (*Writing Horror Fiction* 12), but more than that, it positioned Hutson as a new voice of contemporary horror fiction similar to Herbert in 1974: "Welcome a new horror-writing talent to rival James Herbert," the reverse jacket of *Slugs* read, "... and never sleep soundly again." Yet, as

mentioned in the introduction of this article, Hutson was not striving to achieve what Herbert had with *The Rats*. Rather, he entrenched both his work and himself in popular culture of the 1980s, namely heavy metal and horror videos. Nevertheless, WH Allen/Star, by positioning him as a new voice of horror, was attempting to accomplish two things. First, it was looking to meet the demand of the industry by publishing another book about killer insects. Second, it was doing something rarely done in the literary nasties market: identifying one author as the next big thing. Hutson's affinity for metal and horror, the publisher hoped, might appeal to a new generation of horror readers.

Hutson and Heavy Metal

Hutson's 1980s fiction is, the author has said on many occasions, influenced by heavy metal music (e.g. Hughes 17). References to the genre are overt in paratextual materials and extradiegetic components of Hutson's novels, such as his dustjacket author photos. The images of author James Herbert on the back cover of his novels were indicative of their type; black and white, depicting the author looking outward, but dressed casually, and thus, otherwise "every day" in his appearance. Hutson, by comparison, is presented in his author photographs as a "metal head"; his image, as per the album sleeves of many a hard rock act, corresponding with that which Epstein, Pratto and Skipper (qtd. in Brown "Everything Louder" 262) term, the "classic look" of heavy metal: "torn jeans, black t-shirts bearing the name of one of many popular heavy metal bands . . ., black leather jackets, long hair, and one earring worn in the left ear (often a skull)." Figure 2.

Inside the books, alongside epigraphs from Marlowe, Shelley, and Nietzsche, there are lyrics from 80s acts such as Mötley Crüe, Kiss, Queensrÿche, Ronnie James Dio, Black Sabbath, and Judas Priest. The influence of metal on Hutson's work accounts for the political ambivalence of his novels, which puts him at odds with the pervasive image of British horror fiction in the 1980s. In an article entitled, "Bloody Hell," published in Britain's *Q* magazine in October 1986, the journalist discusses the social resonances of contemporary British horror fiction. The reader learns how, in Herbert's *The Fog*, the "beast" of the tale is the Ministry of Defense, and how in the third

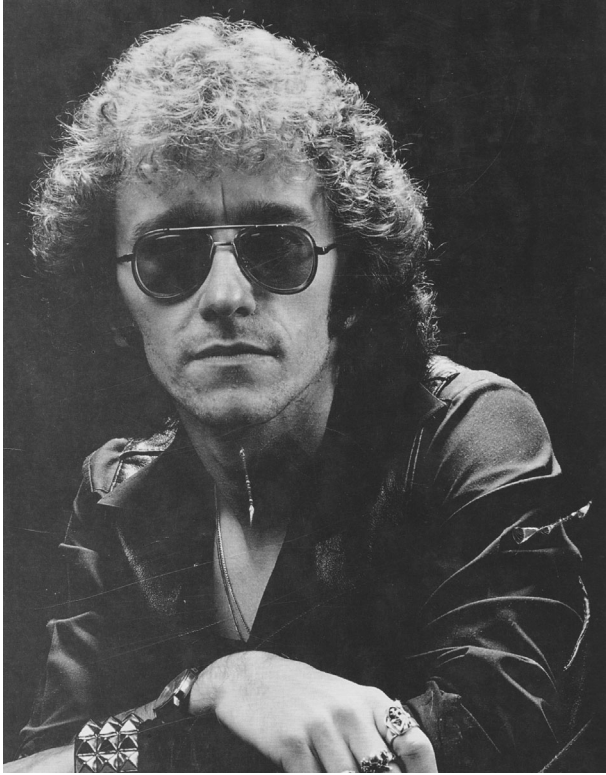


FIGURE 2. Shaun Hutson, a “metal head”. Photographer: Brian Petty / Popular Film and Television Archive.

Rats novel, *Domain*, ‘the rats ... are the British establishment.’ For the other authors mentioned, Clive Barker and Ramsey Campbell, we learn that “life in Thatcher’s Britain ... is ... stimulating to [their] creative juices” (41). It is telling from this report, and others like it, that the writing of Herbert has since been aligned with the spirit of punk rock, a subgenre that, as pioneered by social-conscious bands such as The Sex Pistols, The Ruts, and Stiff Little Fingers, generally speaking, is regarded as politically engaged in a manner that heavy metal, and certainly metal in the 1980s, was not (Brown “Working-class horror” 277). The proximity of *The Rats* and *The Fog* to the punk revolution make them, for Grady Hendrix, “proto-punk ragers [sic.],” which are “nasty, mean,” and “anti-establishment” (Hendrix

82). Simon Brown dubs the early work of Herbert “working-class horror” for similar reasons (Brown “Working-class horror” 277, 284–5). The same anti-establishment mentality also permeates the work of US splatterpunk fiction (Skipp; Sammon 280; see also Aldana Reyes 33–4).

Contrast this “punk” sensibility with the most popular strain of heavy metal in the 80s, so called “glam,” or “hair” (on account of the bands’ audacious, bouffant hairstyles) metal: “They [the bands] were pure entertainers—no tortured artist trip or subversive political intent, no stewing over Reaganomics, El Salvador death squads, nuclear holocaust, or any of society’s other ills” (Blush, 20). Hutson’s fiction owes much to this unpretentious, care-free, no-shits-given disposition. Occasionally, signifiers *are* evoked which anchor the reader to particular moments in British history. In *Slugs*, a character talks disparagingly about a “Government *for* the rich *by* the rich” (133). There are, for instance, allusions to the “Moors Murders” and the “Yorkshire Ripper” in *Victims*. A racist, Conservative politician murders a protestor in *Shadows*. A group of maniacal, homeless, youths are hell-bent on killing the rich in *Assassin*. But in these instances, and a smattering of others, the author’s allusions to contemporary Britain are confetti-like, tokenistic, and superficial, and as such, lack the nuance indicative of Herbert, Barker, and Campbell’s work. Indeed, such fleeting acknowledgements resonate more so with the handful of occasions that hair metal acts gestured to real world issues in their songs, most of the time failing to make any profound statement one way or the other.

The songs “Kiss of Death” from the album, *Back for the Attack*, by Dokken and “I’ve Had Enough (Into the Fire)” from the album *Animalize* by Kiss, released in 1987 and 1984, respectively, are notable examples. The eponymous singer of the former, Don Dokken, remarked at the time that “Kiss of Death” was a commentary on the AIDs epidemic (Hunt). The lyrics, however, are indirect and widely interpretable. The lyrics to “Kiss of Death,” as the title suggests, allude to dangerous sex, but there are more thematic parallels with other songs from the same album, such as “Burning Like a Flame” and “Prisoner,” which address go-to thematic fodder of the hair metal era, namely, hedonism and heartache. Paul Stanley, rhythm guitarist and lead singer of Kiss, before performing “I’ve Had Enough” from the *Animalize* record to a crowd in Glasgow in 1984, announces it as

“[having] to do with a little bit of social commentary” (“KISS - I’ve Had Enough (Into The Fire) (Live in Glasgow, Scotland 1984”). The lyrics, which address such themes as lies and deception and appear to be references to promises made and then broken by the US government, speak, one might argue, of the apathy that punk bands of the period were directing at the Reagan Presidency (Williams). Similarly, the title itself, “I’ve Had Enough,” could equally be read as a call to protest akin to the songs of contemporaneous punk bands, Minor Threat and Reagan Youth (Mattson). Yet Kiss, as fervent capitalists, otherwise endorsed Reaganite principals, the “pseudo-androgyny” (Blush 14) of their appearance ultimately giving way to the “hard-bodied masculinity” President Regan promoted across his tenure and which infiltrated popular culture of the period (Jeffords). Moreover, that other songs on *Animalize* have such titles such “Burn Bitch Burn” and “Thrills in the Night”—both ostensibly about sex—and that Stanley later admitted that the group “consciously avoided espousing political views,” would appear to dilute the message of “I’ve Had Enough” if, indeed, such a message was there in the first place (Stanley 253). “At the end of the day,” Stanley remarks, about “Love Gun,” another Kiss song: “[it] wasn’t about guns—it was about my dick” (Stanley 253). Hutson’s fiction is of the same spirit. It is about an immediate, transient experience that, like hair metal bands of the 1980s, foregrounded the actions of the moment and not the aftermath or consequences: “It’s relentless, throwaway stuff,” Hutson remarked to *Fear* magazine in 1989, likening his novels to the metal music of the period. “It may not be subtle, but when you’ve finished you know you’ve had it!” (Hutson qtd. in Hughes 17).

References to metal are employed in his books in knowingly playful ways. Hutson’s affinity with the genre, for example, plays out in *Slugs*, when John Foley, a twenty-something museum curator who wears Iron Maiden t-shirts to work (75), devises a poison to defeat the slugs, saving the day. There are other examples, as in *Shadows*, when the singer of a rock band disembowels his guitarist with a microphone stand (508), and in *Assassin*, where the eponymous hitman listens to heavy metal bands on a Sony Walkman while murdering his victims (195-202), and quotes hard-rock song lyrics in day-to-day conversation. “Killing is business,” he remarks in Chapter 44, in reference to Megadeth’s breakthrough record from 1985, “and business is good” (212). In *Slugs*, teenagers Clive Talbot and Donna

Moss listen to *The Number of the Beast*, a pivotal record in the career of British metal act, Iron Maiden. The “thunderous bassline” and “strident wall of guitars” of the title track complement the description of Clive and Donna’s day-to-day existences (*Slugs* 131) as heavy metal quite literally functions as the soundtrack of their lives. Clive is written as a rebellious youth, a “bad boy” as in the song by the band Whitesnake (“Bad Boys”). He’s a “black sheep” who is “in an’ out of trouble” (“Bad Boys”), and disliked by Donna’s well-to-do parents who consider him a “lout” (*Slugs* 132). Donna is similarly rebellious, displaying “sexual precocity” that “border[s] on nymphomania” (132), and thus, redolent of the “one-track mindset” of the hair metal era (Blush 20), when “sex was the [most] valued commodity” (26). Clive and Donna’s backstory of teen rebellion, thus, resonates with the narratives of many a contemporary metal song, not least Twisted Sister’s 1984 anthem, “We’re Not Gonna Take It.” The music video for the song shows a teenager, in response to his father yelling, “What do you want to do with your life?,” reply wryly, “I wanna rock!,” before strumming a guitar, the power of which propels the father through a bedroom window and onto the ground outside.

In other ways, the hard rock element of Hutson’s output is bound to the author’s writing style, his penchant for disregarding exposition, with works that are slim and designed to be consumed quickly by an avaricious readership. His novels, much like the majority of the songs by the bands he quotes, are best understood in their original contexts of conception, as ephemeral, and indicative of the quest of producers across the spectrum of entertainment to generate content for the fickle tastes of the so-called MTV Generation (Foscht et al). Indeed, the style of heavy metal that Hutson’s work most overtly chimes with is not that of British bands such as Black Sabbath, Saxon and Iron Maiden, despite Hutson being a superfan of the latter (and going as far as dedicating the novel *Victims* to the group). Rather, as mentioned earlier, Hutson’s horror fiction is more squarely aligned with what “hair metal” signified.

Hair metal marked a break in tradition as far as the history of rock and roll was concerned. Metal went from a genre that was initially feared by the moral majority for its alleged satanic associations, to something that was cliché-driven and overtly-consumer-focused. As Steven Blush argues:

All discussions of previous pop/rock forms . . . posit brash young rebels against a staid musical establishment, followed by the evolution of something new in their wake. Such revolution was not the case with Hair Metal.

Here was a form that was NOT about doing something new. Its entire raison d'être was embracing clichés . . . The music pushed classic Rock motifs to their limits. . . the Hair Metal guys took it to new extremes.

(Blush 8)

Hutson was doing something similar with horror by taking, as one reviewer had it, “creaky old cliché[s]” (de Whalley 71), but upping the ante in a manner befitting the “new extremes” of Thatcherite consumerism, and as this essay now proceeds to consider, horror film during the video era.

Hutson and Horror Video

Writing about the splatterpunk movement, Aldana Reyes argues that “[a] fond allegiance to a cinematic tradition is crucial to fully understanding the ethos behind [it], not least because it is partly named after splatter films” (30). Hutson also cites film as a major influence on his writing, and over the years, has embraced criticisms that his books read like “padded out screenplays” (“Bloody Good Reads”). As with Hutson’s allusions to metal, the acknowledgements of his books are littered with references to iconic genre filmmakers, including those aligned with the “splatter” tradition, such as the directors of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and *Halloween* (1978), Tobe Hooper and John Carpenter, respectively. Tellingly, throughout the 1980s, Hutson borrows themes and plots from popular horror cycles of the period, such as slashers (*Chainsaw Terror*), revenge of nature narratives (*Slugs, Breeding Ground*), telepathy and telekinesis (*Spawn*), witchcraft and the occult (*The Skull, Relics*), possession (*Shadows*), and zombies and the undead (*Erebus, Assassin*). In that way, there are similarities between Hutson’s novels and Canadian author, Richard Layman, whose work possesses a “screenplay quality” and “contains abundant references” to horror films old and new (Reyes 36). The key differences between the two, however, are the national contexts in which

each were written, and the distribution of Hutson's work in particular.

In 1982, when Hutson's first horror novels, *The Skull* and *Slugs*, were published, the nascent videocassette market in Britain was booming, and there were almost 80 distributors vying for attention on the increasingly crowded shelves of the 10,000 retail video outlets. Numerous strategies were adopted by video companies to distinguish their products from their competitors, including targeting hitherto untapped audiences such as families with young children (Walker 97-107). Another strategy, which is most relevant to this discussion, saw companies look to other entertainment industries for inspiration, including paperback publishing ("Distributors as Publishers"). According to Maureen Bartlett, the managing director of the video distributor, Videomedia, which at the time was enjoying success with a series of horror releases, "video distributors are akin to book publishers. Acquiring product, putting it together and editing it, packaging for appeal and trying to achieve the best possible sales" ("Distributors as Publishers" 42). Indeed, the popularity of horror on video echoed mass-market publishers such as NEL, Hamlyn and Futura, which enjoyed success with horror releases, so much so, that their respective lists had been growing steadily since the mid-1970s.

Undoubtedly, the popularity of horror literature at that time was, at least in part, enabled by a media campaign spear-headed by the right-wing press against horror *videos* in 1982, during which news outlets documented concerns about the widespread availability of "uncensored horror video cassettes, available to anybody of any age" (Chippendale qtd. in Petley, "Are we insane?" 75). Video titles such as *The Driller Killer* (1979), *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980), *Snuff* (1975), *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, and others, were identified across the campaign, their lurid video sleeves and marketing ballyhoo positioning them as indicative of "new, extreme and unsurpassed horror" (Egan 51), "entirely different" to that of, say, the Universal or Hammer traditions (Bright qtd. in Petley 46). It is telling that the term employed to describe such videos was "video nasties," a neologism likely used to evoke a semantic parallel between horror video and the "nasties" of the publishing world.

Further, as per graphic violence foregrounded by *The Rats* and sustained by its imitators, horror video distributors would often highlight violent spectacles across promotional materials (Egan 51;

McKenna; Walker 108-123). This method of marketing was a consequence of distributors treating videos “as paperbacks,” taking cues from the publishing industry’s marketing strategies to make their products “stand out on the crowded shelves” (Campbell 36). Indeed, the packaging for both books and videos was regarded as “the most important marketing strategy” (Dean “The Cover-up Job” 26). Packaging was essential to each medium’s success, given that many of the authors or actors adorning publicity materials were unknown to British consumers, and that many of the products were produced hurriedly, and rarely considered by critics or the publishers/distributors themselves as being of a particularly high standard. Unable to rely on recognisable names or, for that matter, favourable reviews, “a well-presented cover with attractive artwork” enabled companies to “move a larger quantity of poor quality product” (Dean “Dressed to Sell” 21; see also Smith *Writing Horror Fiction* 11-12).

In *Nasty Business: The Marketing and Distribution of the Video Nasties*, Mark McKenna implies a relationship between the video and publishing industries when he explains that the artwork for *The Driller Killer* (distributed by VIPCO) was not “without precedent” as some media commentators were suggesting. In actuality, it mirrored the jackets of the 22nd and 23rd editions of the popular paperback anthology series, the *Pan Book of Horror Stories*. The books were contemporaneous to the video nasties and included artworks depicting eviscerated/bloodied human faces similar to VIPCO’s promotional materials. While McKenna recognising that the *Horror Stories* book covers are “every bit as gory” as the sleeve of *The Driller Killer* (86), he does not discuss the apparent give-and-take between the book and video industries. Rather, McKenna rationalises that the absence of “the kind of hype and showmanship of early exploitation [film] promotion” present on the sleeve of *The Driller Killer*, but absent on the covers of *Horror Stories*, is due to such promotional strategies being less common “in the world of book jacket design” (86). In actuality, the opposite is true, as the covers and advertising of Hutson’s novels reveal. Figure 3.

Slugs is one example, its cover bellowing “A NOVEL OF MIND-SHATTERING HORROR.” Likewise, the cover of *Erebus* offers consumers a faux warning typical of exploitation film distributors and video advertising: “READ *EREBUS* AND NEVER EAT RED MEAT AGAIN...” The jacket of *Chainsaw Terror* (a novel Hutson wrote

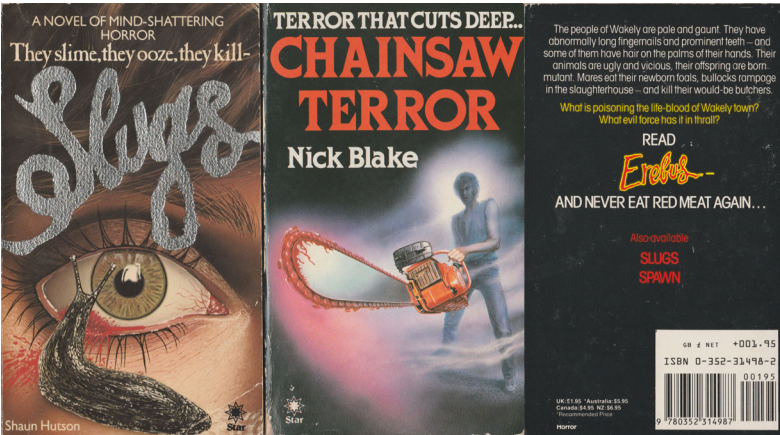


FIGURE 3. Exploitation marketing tactics: *Slugs* (front cover), *Chainsaw Terror* (front cover) and *Erebus* (reverse cover). Image credit: Popular Film and Television Archive. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

under the pseudonym ‘Nick Blake’) bears striking parallels with the British video artwork used to promote controversial horror videos, *The Toolbox Murders* (1978), *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, and *Pieces*, all of which depict a faceless or unseen assailant threatening would-be victims with a power tool. The strapline that runs across the top of its cover, “TERROR THAT CUTS DEEP,” echoes phrases used to promote the aforementioned video cassettes: “HE CARVED A NIGHTMARE!” (*Toolbox Murders*); “a night of fear and blood” (*Texas Chain Saw*); and “A MACABRE STORY OF REVENGE!” (*Pieces*). Furthermore, the jacket of Hutson’s *Assassin*, published in 1988, at a time when video companies were seeking to re-release controversial or banned titles, and when certain video nasty directors were attaining cult status (Cairns 8-9), depicts the hand of a zombie, its flesh green with decay and exposed bone exposed, holding a gun, is evocative of the artwork used to promote the banned video, *Zombie Flesh Eaters*, which famously shows a zombie’s hand breaking through the earth.

In the case of the video nasties, media discourse and promotional materials played a major role in instilling in the minds of the public the content of horror videos, even if the films were actually less explicit or shocking than press coverage and adverts claimed (Egan 57). Hutson appeared to take media discourse about video companies

“exploit[ing] extremes of violence” (Chippendale qtd. in Petley 75) and funnel it into his writing in ways that surpassed the violent content of most horror films. Again, one turns to *Chainsaw Terror*, a novel originally commissioned in 1983 in lieu of the novelisation rights to *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* being too expensive (Gilbert 77). At the time, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* was routinely featured in video nasties discourse about violent content and remained a highly popular video cassette. Yet, in actuality, “there was so little violence and gore” in the film (Rose 19; see also Petley 75). The opposite, however, is true of *Chainsaw Terror*, which while seeming to borrow key themes or sequences from contemporaneous horror videos as its basis, ventures into far more explicit territory, appearing to knowingly reinforce the mythology of video nasties created by the press.

Similar to the horror film *Pieces* (1982), which was released on video in Britain in the summer of 1983 (the original video artwork which, depicted a topless woman being attacked with a chainsaw, was withdrawn), *Chainsaw Terror* begins a number of years prior to the events of the main storyline, with a child experiencing trauma at home. *Pieces* sees a young boy scolded by his mother for assembling a pornographic jigsaw puzzle:

You dirty-minded little brat, playing with filth like this, just like your father! If you don't watch it, that's what you're going to grow up like. And I can tell you a couple of things about him, the bastard! I'll kill you if I ever find stuff like that in the house again!

The mother throws a photograph of the boy's father at a mirror, smashing it, before proceeding to frantically search her son's room for other “filth” to “burn.” Her son, offscreen for several seconds, returns to view, towering over his mother with an axe, which he then forcibly brings down on her head numerous times. In *Chainsaw Terror*, as in this sequence in *Pieces*, the death of the mother serves as the catalyst for the horrors that ensue (thereby utilising a hokey, Freudian, cliché of the genre). However, in Hutson's novel, the killer, Edward Briggs, is not the one being scolded. Rather, he witnesses a fight between his mother, Sheila, and his father, Raymond. Sheila, fed up with Raymond's alcoholism and abusive behavior, tells him in a manner not dissimilar to the mother in *Pieces*, that he's a “bastard” (12),

and that she's leaving him for another man. A fight ensues, and concludes with Raymond murdering Sheila with a shard of glass from a broken mirror, again paralleling *Pieces*, and then slitting his own throat. Hutson writes:

He lifted the piece of glass and held it against his flesh. He pressed harder then, closing his eyes, he drew the piece of glass across the soft area just beneath his chin. The skin tore like rent fabric, blood vessels, severed by the passage of the weapon, spewed forth fountains of blood which seemed to hang in the air. Curving in crimson parabolas as they spurted from the ever widening cut. Like water from a broken dam the crimson fluid gushed out and Briggs rolled onto his back, his body quivery madly for long seconds, eyes rolling frenziedly in their sockets. He felt his bladder give out, the warm urine running down his leg and then, as blackness finally swept over him, his sphincter muscle failed. They lay on the bed together, like discarded rag dolls.

(15-16)

In response, Edward walks into the room, calmly calls the police, and then meditates. For the remainder of the novel, he stalks and kills sex workers in Soho in a variety of grisly ways using an assortment of power tools, while sexually obsessing over his sister. *Chainsaw Terror*, in this regard, bears many a hallmark of *Pieces*, with the killer in the latter revealed in the film's conclusion to be the boy from the opening scene, now in adulthood. Yet, Hutson's novel is considerably more forensic in detail. The mother's murder in *Pieces* lasts for a matter of seconds, while the fight between Sheila and Raymond in *Chainsaw Terror* runs for five of the chapter's ten pages, in a book one hundred seventy-three pages long. Other murders in the novel are comparable, as in Chapter 14, when a sex worker named Penny is cut in half by a chainsaw from her genitals upwards. Her death is a page-long in a chapter that is only two pages long:

... with a shout of pleasure, [Edward] drove the monstrous blade forward. It ripped into her, pulverising the delicate flesh, tearing upwards through her body, the barbs hacking effortlessly onward as he pushed, driving further until they began to churn through her intestines. Blood sprayed in all directions. Now he wrenched it free, briefly hearing the drone of metal on bone as it crunched her pelvis and lower ribs into a thousand splinters. Entrails seemed to

snake upwards like the bleeding tentacles of some stricken octopus and stench so rank it made him sick, wafted up from the riven cavity of her stomach.

(*Chainsaw Terror* 90)

Edwards then proceeds to dismember the corpse. *Pieces* has since been described as “one of the goriest films of the ‘80s” (Navarro), but it does not compare to *Chainsaw Terror*, which, for all intents and purposes, is best understood as a slasher film in book form. The novel is far wilder and excessive, revelling in bad taste just as the video nasties—allegedly “full of sick, loveless violence”—were said to do (Wardell qtd. in James 6).

One finds additional examples of violence described in lurid detail, and comparable to a particularly controversial scene in the video nasty, *The Evil Dead* (1981), in which a woman is raped by a tree. Thus, violence is not always committed by human assailants. For example, “a black mass” of slugs forcibly invade Donna in *Slugs* (139), a scene that appears to bridge the fleeting tree-rape scene of *The Evil Dead* with the lengthy, reportedly “sadistic,” gang-rape sequences of another video nasty regularly discussed in press discourse, *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) (*The Daily Mail* qtd. in Martin 14):

Another struck her buttocks, boring deep into the flesh and now Donna struggled to her feet but, a third slug slid up the inside of her leg, and to her horror, Donna felt it boring into her crutch [sic]. She screamed with renewed ferocity as the thick black thing forced its way into her, like some obscene bloated penis. Blood began to flood down the inside of her legs, spraying the carpet, and in a second, the slug had disappeared inside her.

Donna collapsed. Laying across the bed, she was helpless as more of the slugs slid over her body, feeding on the warm flesh and enjoying the distinctive taste of the flowing blood.

(*Slugs*, 140)

Scenes such as these are akin to the public image of video nasties, with the examples written with a degree of self-awareness. Importantly, we can assume that readers familiar with Hutson’s work expect to encounter this type of graphic content. As with

promotional copy that accompanied the release of *Pieces*, Hutson's work during this period is, as the marketing for *Pieces* proclaims, "exactly what you think it is." There is, to this end, much in common between Hutson's writing and what Philip Brophy, in an influential article written in 1982 but not published until 1985, argued about contemporary horror cinema:

The contemporary Horror film *knows* that you've seen it before; it *knows* that you know what is about to happen; and it knows that you know it knows you know. And none of it means a thing, as the cheapest trick in the book will still tense your muscles, quicken your heart and jangle your nerves. It is the *present*—the precise point of speech, of utterance, of plot, of event—that is ever of any value. Its effect disappears with the gulping breath, the gasping shriek, swallowed up by the fascistic continuum of the fiction. A nervous giggle of amoral delight as you prepare yourself in a totally self-deluding way for the next shock. Too late. Freeze. Crunch. Chill. Scream. Laugh.

(Brophy 5)

Hutson embracing the nasty—the "present"—is to be understood in similar terms. His fiction revels in excess and amoral delights at a time when the excesses of horror cinema were at once condemned by the press yet consumed avariciously, and *enjoyed*, by audiences.

Conclusion

There are clear parallels between the violent extravagances of Hutson's writings during the 1980s and the fiction of Herbert, Barker, and the splatterpunks. Yet, Hutson's disregard of the elements that, for so many, make literature worthy objects of study, makes his oeuvre a curiosity. The cultural historian, by stepping back from, say, allegorical readings, is able to more accurately take stock of the pop cultural moment Hutson was operating in, appraise industry strategies, and develop a fuller understanding of how publishers attempted to target audiences. In the case of Shaun Hutson, this meant reflecting widespread consumerist practices, and engaging with popular music and film.

It is befitting that in 1988, *Slugs* was adapted for the screen by Juan Piquer Simón, the director of *Pieces*. Just as Hutson was seeking to transgress the violence of the video nasties, *Slugs: The Movie* (1988), was made with the same attitude, offering a gory, visceral experience, that is not meant to be taken seriously. It is, in fact, a remarkably faithful adaptation, heralded as a cult classic on account of the rigid performances of its actors, clunky dialogue, “memorable deaths and ooey goeey practical effects” (Navarro). While Hutson has expressed embarrassment about the film, explaining on British television in 1989 that he has “been trying to keep [it] quiet,” the movie is closer to the spirit of Hutson’s fiction than the author is prepared to acknowledge (“The Last Resort”). It is a fitting tribute to an author, who through a culmination of metal music and video nasty excesses, strove to offer his readership, as hair band Poison sang, “nothin’ but a good time.”

Notes

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Note: Unless specified, films cited are given the year of their British video release, as per the forgoing analysis.

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