

Magdalena Zdrodowska
Jagiellonian University

Vampires, zombies, and phantoms – histories of horror stories. Review

The second half of the year 2016 was generous for Polish fans of dreadful stories as two interesting books came along. The first, *Wiedza potworna. Horror w badaniach kulturowych* (*The Monstrous Knowledge. Horror stories and cultural studies*) published by the Nicolaus Copernicus University Press, contains seven essays by faculties and PhD candidates of the Cultural Studies Department of the same University. The essays cover a wide range of topics, from Polish folk tales to Japanese horror stories. The second book is an anthropological monograph of the horror film *Upiór w kamerze. Zarys kulturowej historii kina grozy* (*Phantom of the camera. The cultural history of the horror film*) by Magdalena Kamińska, published by Municipal Gallery Arsenal in Poznań, Poland. This book is the outcome of a series of lectures on the history of horror films conducted by Kamińska in the Gallery. These publications complement each other, providing the reader with a wide range of contexts and references of horror stories.

The authors of the essays contained in the *The Monstrous Knowledge*, who work in the field of anthropology and cultural studies, deal with a wide range of issues from folk tales to video games. Each essay is devoted to a specific problem that may be genre, national context, or a figure such as a vampire or zombie. The opening essay by Dariusz Brzostek is somewhat out of the box; it takes up the figure of an anthropologist coming back from field research as a monstrous character and a source of threat for his/her people. The threat is based on the transition of the scientist from Western rationality to the savage (monstrous) knowledge of the people who were supposed to be the subject, not the source of wisdom. The anthropologist is presented as a double stranger: for both the researched community where he/she arrives and for his/her own people upon return. This initial essay is not only a self-referential game undertaken by a culture researcher, but also introduces the primary theme of the whole book: monstrous knowledge as a non-scientific, non-rational (in the academic, Western understanding) pattern of world interpretation and possible scenarios of action. It is knowledge that permits the supernatural as the actor in reality, as it dresses up the otherness in monstrosity.

The second chapter, written by Piotr Grochowski and Pamela Staroń, is devoted to the powerful Polish folklore figure of the phantom. In fact, it is a monography of the phantom in Polish traditional culture and reshapes its image, which is already grounded in Polish ethnography. Phantoms used to be described by folklore researchers as a multitude of locally characterised figures of different genders and scopes of action (e.g. vampire, nymph, and spook). However, the authors propose treating all these creatures as creations constructed from a wide range of folk motives that would be activated whenever needed.

The remaining chapters of *The Monstrous Knowledge* deal with horror stories either in literature, film, or in video games. Those by Aldona Kobus and Wojciech Jaracz are discussed in more detail below.

In her essay on Ann Rice's vampire novels, Kobus focuses on two elements: the gothic and the queerness as elements that constitute Rice's writing. Using them, Kobus presents the novels as transgressive and opposing the dominant ideology, but also points out that these qualities were constitutive of the 19th century gothic prototypes of Rice's literature. Kobus recalls the multitude of examples of drag, lesbian relations, male women, and feminine men in gothic literature and Rice makes use of these one century later by introducing, for example, a queer family and homosexual desires into the vampire community she describes. This vampirical subversiveness also penetrated film adaptations, marking them with transgressive tensions; however, Kobus points out that the wave of romantic stories about vampires that followed *Interview with the Vampire* (1992, dir. Neil Jordan) resulted in narratives that were extensively erotic, but also extremely conservative on closer inspection. The chapter closes with an in-depth critique of the *True Blood* series (2008-2014, HBO).

Wojciech Jaracz concentrates on horror films of the second half of the 20th century, pointing out the changing status of the body as their driving force. In fact, horror films owe their power more to the horror of the body and disgust, rather than fear. The fitter and more well-kept the body was supposed to be in the second half of the century, the more dreadful were the associations with animality, death, aging and pain. Jaracz underlines both the dominant discourses and the fact that the counterculture valued the body highly as a source of self-expression. In this context, the disintegration of the body and the cruelty in horror films is explained as a powerful element of the genre.

The second book is *The Phantom of the Camera*, by Magdalena Kamińska, who has experience in both culture and media studies. Her book is the first Polish monography of horror film since 1986; others were mainly lexicons. Kamińska's first and foremost assumption is that the horror story is a universal narrative and fulfils "an anthropological task" (as she calls it). The core of a horror story is an anti-miracle, a conflict between humans and supernatural forces. Horror stories wake up existential fears as well as strategies for coping with the fear of death and unknown in the real life of readers, listeners, and viewers.

Kamińska starts with a reflection on film genres and horror movies in particular. She states that rather from traditional culture and folk tales themselves, horror films come from their transposition by gothic literature; however, she does not negate the powerful influence of contemporary urban legends on horror films. Due to literary reinterpretations, during the 19th century folk creatures gained emotions, motivations, and psychological depth: they were no longer simple representations of pure evil and malice. Telling the story of the horror film, Kamińska moves back and forth between Europe and United States. She begins in 1920's Germany, where the genre was born (yet not proclaimed nor coded) in the expressionistic tales of Murnau, Dreyer, Wegener, and Lang. Then she moves across the Atlantic to Hollywood, where the canonical figures of Dracula and Frankenstein's monster were taken up and fully exploited in the following decades. She then goes back to Europe to tell the story of eurotrash films, especially British Hammer productions, and follows the counterculture in the United States with the new wave of sophisticated, award winning horror movies, as well as the birth of gore and splatter. The latter are defined by the author more as an aesthetic style than a subgenre and not exclusively associated with horror. Kamińska closes with a rather bitter reflection on the rebirth of horror in the 1990s in the form of neo-baroque, which for some reason she defines as digital, although the films that Kamińska credits as such do not contain much CGI. As a great fan of F.F. Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992), I have to mention my doubts regarding the presentation of this film. It was classified by Kamińska as digital neo-baroque, even though Coppola openly gave up CGI and generated almost all the special effects using old-fashioned, analogue techniques. This decision was crucial as the whole movie is an (successful in my opinion) attempt to capture the history of the vampire film in a nutshell. It evokes the German tradition of vampire-the monster, the early Hollywood tradition of vampire-the elegant, the foreign aristocrat, and the exploitation tradition of vampire-the sexual predator. This aspect (that seems extremely interesting) is absent from Kamińska's analysis.

The book is a vibrant and entertaining narrative on the history of the horror film. The author claims the genre is based on universal human needs and emotions, regardless of administrative or national borders; however, her selection of films and trends is limited to Western or even more narrow Anglo-Saxon realms. It is in fact the history of American and British horror films with a few short detours into German, French, and Italian trends, evoked whenever Anglo-Saxon film tradition related to or used them. Basically, non-Western films are absent from the landscape of Kamińska's history of horror movies. The closing chapter is indeed devoted to Japanese horror films, but starts with *The Ring* (1998, dir. Hideo Nakata) and does not present much more. Even when they are mentioned, non-Western horror films are evoked only from a Western point of view; *The Ring* being the first Japanese horror story to catch the attention of American and European audiences. Other than Japanese movies, Asian horror films are only signalled, and South American, African or even East European are not even mentioned. In addition, films belonging to the

genre but not regarded as important, cult or classic (from today's perspective) are not included in the book at all or only briefly mentioned.

All this makes Kamińska's book a history of the Western classic (or mainstream) horror film; richly inlaid with contexts, cultural backgrounds, curiosities, and the like, and it fulfils its role brilliantly. *Phantom of the Camera* is a valuable proposition, a diachronic narrative concentrating on the links between the trends and subgenres, trying to ground them in both the culture and production schemes of specific periods. Kamińska reconstructs the cultural and film contexts as well as the production aspects, rather than abbreviating the plots of the specific films, which is often the case and a real sore point of Polish film studies.

What needs to be mentioned concerning *Phantom of the Camera* is the beauty of the book. Hard covered and printed on fine paper, it conveys not only Kamińska's narrative, but also the highly consistent graphic layout and illustrations by Paweł Flieger. The book is solicitously edited with pages having separate layouts combining text and Flieger's graphics. This conscientiousness is worth praising as, on today's Polish publishing market, academic books as nicely published as this are not common, as (often appearing in publishing series) they follow the pattern of economic paper, ink, and usage of space.

Both books are of a great value as reflection on horror stories (in both literature and film) is painfully underrepresented in Poland, where popular culture seems unworthy of serious academic interest. They are interesting when read together as in many aspects they complement each other. Kamińska's book casts a broad light on the long-term development and relations and influences of the horror film, while *The Monstrous Knowledge* spotlights specific tropes, figures, and contexts.

Magdalena Kamińska, *Upiór w kamerze. Zarys kulturowej historii kina grozy*, (Poznań: Municipal Gallery Arsenał) (2016).

***Potworna wiedza. Horror w badaniach kulturowych*, ed. Dariusz Brzostek, Aldona Kobus, Miłosz Markocki, (Toruń: Nicolaus Copernicus University Press) (2016).**