

The Anthropology of Horror: Theoretical Challenges and Epistemological Potential

From a disciplinary angle, horror could be viewed as a more imaginative, illegitimate brother of anthropology, or rather, its more poetic, kindred soul. Much like horror, the anthropological way of thinking is preoccupied by matters of the alien, the otherworldly, the hidden and the marginal. The two angles of viewing people and their world intersect in a number of common issues, starting with questions of the body and embodiment, through the relationship between an individual and the community and the community toward otherness, to the basic questions of people's spiritual and posthumous lives. Yet, horror as a specific artistic genre has not been researched enough within an anthropological framework, perhaps because it offers artistic and not strictly scientific answers to questions posed by anthropology.

In this thematic issue of *Issues in Ethnology and Anthropology*, for the first time in Serbian anthropology an opportunity arose to publish a collection of scientific texts about the horror genre in one place. Authors who generously submitted their papers for this thematic issue have shown that horror stories can be interpreted in a number of ways which demand a degree of interdisciplinarity, but without ever leaving the familiar framework of the anthropological focus. However, the analysis of horror stories is not common within our discipline. Why is this?

The most conspicuous explanation for the systematic neglect of horror in anthropological research would be that there are huge gaps between the discourses of horror and anthropology, and that the biggest of those can be found in the context of their disparate treatment of otherness. Namely, within horror narratives, the strange and creepy Other is mostly evil in nature, or at least unknowable. What we find in horror stories with regard to encountering Otherness causes us to feel fascination and fear – fascination, because it is alien; fear because it is ominous. In an anthropological framework such an approach to a culture, community, phenomenon or practice is unimaginable: for the discipline of anthropology far off peoples, strange beliefs, unknown taxonomies and weird rituals have always represented a powerful intellectual challenge, a mental urge to classify the studied group, phenomenon or process within *some* rationally

comprehensible laws, which was done with more or less violence with regard to the previously collected facts. Thus, in horror stories Otherness is presented as a threat to life, sanity and/or the existing order, while in anthropology, it is the object of theoretical and methodological considerations and a source of scientific knowledge.

How is it then possible to apply anthropological knowledge to the analysis of otherness in the contexts of horror stories? There are a number of solutions. One of them posits that we interpret the Other through the category of the monstrous. Namely, the monstrous in a horror story emits a certain quality of the alien and unnerving; through contact with it we come closer to a kind of border and, depending on the author's intent (and skill as a storyteller), we cross that border more or less subtly. The focus of an anthropological analysis of a horror story can therefore, be geared towards unearthing the socio-cultural context of such borders, wherein it is desirable first to ask what they separate, between which fields they have been drawn. At first glance, if we take the foremost works in the genre, the answer seems too complex, as it covers different conceptual categories such as 'alive' and 'dead', 'good' and 'evil', 'tangible' and 'intangible', 'rational' and 'irrational', the norm and what is considered taboo. However, if we look at the problem on a more abstract level, we can see that the line of demarcation is evident in all, or nearly all of the best horror stories, drawn between two basic classes of phenomena – the visible and the invisible world: one encompasses the domain of the natural, common-sensical and familiar, while the other encompasses the domain of the supernatural, the magical and that which is basically unknown. Whether it comes from a conflict between the darkness and the light, science and magic, the pure and the impure, normal and the paranormal, the horror narrative strives to test the aforementioned boundaries through a fictional narrative, to erase them, invert them or radically expand them. Anthropological research of such narratives could, within the given regiment of meanings, move toward uncovering the cultural dimensions of these boundaries through interpreting their functions and structural qualities.

A second approach could find its basis in the analogy between horror and anthropology and the practice of translating. Anthropological theory and practice could, in keeping with this analogy, be understood as a collection of scientific procedures the aim of which is the translation of the categories of one culture to the corresponding categories of another culture; while the horror narrative could be viewed as a creative act of translating cultural norms, ideas, as well as emotions, impressions, thoughts and experiences of an author from one – "real" – into another fictional "register". This, more mentalist approach to horror, would demand three successive phases of research. Within the first phase, we would posit the question of *what* a horror author is translating into fiction, *how* they do it and which shared cultural meanings they utilize would be part of the second

phase, and in the third phase we would focus on an analysis of the reception of the signified narrative within a given culture. The empirical value of this, third, phase is of special importance as it would point us to the connotative aspects of a horror story and the possible directions of its cultural contextualization, which is, basically the end goal of anthropological research into any field of socio-cultural reality, or its artistic representation.

However, anthropological theoretical and methodological approaches to the field of horror are by no means limited to those aforementioned, as evidenced by the vivid contents of this thematic issue.

A theoretical analysis of the genesis of fear in horror stories Marko Pišev handles from the interesting viewpoint of the creators of such narratives themselves in the paper *Horror and evil*. Starting from the idea that the concept of evil in horror comes from liminal states and phenomena, Pišev asks the question of whether the conceptualization of evil can be fitted into a wider socio-cultural context or whether it is the sole product of the imagination and subjective mental states of the authors themselves. In trying to find answers, the author of the paper analyzes the contents of different essays and instructions for writing horror stories written by some of the preeminent authors of the genre. With the aim of widening anthropological knowledge, research like this is important because it focuses on intimate, irrational and obscure sides of the culture in which an author creates and to which they speak. Pišev believes that through their analysis we can not only get at the knowledge about boundaries of the culturally conceptualizable, but about the private, elusive contents of the human mind which are the basis on which the individual doubt as to the veracity of shared cultural ideas about the nature of reality is built.

Horror motifs can be interpreted from the standpoint of the historical moment and the cultural “paradigm” that goes with it, as in the paper by Bojan Žikić *Horror and the fascination with the eternal body: the mummy in early horror literature*. In this paper, Žikić considers the paradigm of Victorian culture in Great Britain in the latter half of the 19th century, linking it to the colonial expansion of Britain, its civilizing mission in the Middle East (and elsewhere) and the specific dissonance which this paradigm endured in contact with the material remains of the ancient Egyptian civilization and its mysterious, and even partly mystical cultural heritage. According to Žikić, the mummy in the cultural imagination of the Victorian era became a metaphor for ancient Egypt: the territory and the inhabitants of this ancient African country might have been physically absorbed into the bloodstream of the Empire, but the whole of ancient Egyptian culture remained intact by British military conquest. This unpleasant impression which the “civilizers” had when confronted by the immensity of a civilization far older than their own, turned out to be, as Žikić shows, inspira-

tional in creating horror stories with the motif of the mummy. The body of the mummy became the battlefield for the permeation of two completely different cultures, one from which the authors of the stories came, and the other, whose material remains suggest an unknown and thus horrifying plane of posthumous existence.

Also dealing with the motif of the reanimated dead body is the article by Marina Mandić, titled *The United States of 'Zombieland'*, where the author analyzes the motif of the living dead in contemporary cinematography from the standpoint of the anthropology of migrations. Mandić's basic idea is that the theoretical framework invented to understand the urges and processes of population movement in the "real world" can be applied to the analysis of social migrations in the fictional world of a zombie outbreak. This interesting scientific experiment, similar to Žikić's, starts off with the premise that a horror narrative can – and should – be viewed as an allegory for a socio-cultural phenomenon or process, and that that allegory can then, given the appropriate scientific literature, be interpreted as the process itself. In other words, after we have recognized a real social issue as the central motive in a poetic image or metaphor, the next step is to interpret the whole horror story using theories designed to analyze a specific problem. However, this direction of application of anthropological knowledge on the study of horror is shown to be superfluous or utterly inadequate when the allegory in the story is not completely straightforward, or when it strives to express an intimate experience, phobia, unease, a dislocated state of mind... which it would be analytically wrong to generalize to the level of a cultural phenomenon or socio-cultural process.

Especially fertile ground for the anthropological analysis of horror stories is a horror narrative with motifs of folklore fantasy, as is successfully demonstrated by James Kloda's paper, *The Final Girl on the Freeway*, which focuses on the analysis of the movie 1996 *Freeway* by American director Matthew Bright. Conceived as a horror adaptation of "Little Red Riding Hood", Bright's film is a modern version of the traditional folk tale, radically modified and in some elements even inverted at the level of form and content, and told anew with the aim of a critical view of the primordial pattern of the fairytale. In Kloda's article, two narratives, the folklore narrative and the film narrative, are simultaneously analyzed through the method of careful reading with a focus on the semantic aspects of both narratives. The many layers of meaning in both "texts" come into focus when viewed in contrast. Kloda's analytical skills and elegant argumentation are the best proof that an anthropological look at fiction is useful and epistemologically enriching, when it manages to go deep under the surface of the visual and folklore "text" with enough empirical skill and theoretical knowhow.

That insights from other related disciplines are important for the anthropological research of horror is evidenced by the paper titled *The Three Paradigms of Horror* by Dejan Ognjanović. This is an important and tightly structured article, which will undoubtedly be useful to horror scholars within and beyond the confines of anthropology. Ognjanović classifies horror fiction based on the idea that there are three possible approaches to the genre – the fear of oneself, the fear of the other and the fear of the numinous – each of which is itself susceptible to a progressive or conservative treatment of the story, which makes up a total of six basic “recipes” for the production of horror narratives. By giving examples for each of the three “paradigms”, Ognjanović covers a great wealth of themes within the horror genre and, more importantly, offers a clear and discerning classification of elements of horror and the horrific in fiction the basic aesthetic aim of which is to cause fear. Ognjanović’s further layering of narrative meanings in horror stories through an analytical view of conservative and liberal treatments of horror elements in the aforementioned paradigms will prove especially interesting for an anthropological audience. Aside from widening the initial classificatory scheme, variations of horror stories along the progressive or conservative lines respectively, and linked to the specific approach to the genre open up a space for the introduction of new elements in the scientific study of horror, such as cultural, psychological and metaphysical dimensions of the narrative, which is of fundamental importance for this fledgling, still largely undefined anthropological field of inquiry.

Finally, Jocelyn Ganjhara Jurich’s paper was included in this thematic issue for two reasons: a) because, in contrast to Marina Mandić’s paper, it uses theory developed in the study of horror fiction to interpret phenomena from the “real world”; and b) because in the analysis of non-fictional, real events and their artistic representations it leans on aesthetic and cognitive-epistemological studies of horror which were hardly – if at all – mentioned in the aforementioned papers. In the paper *Haunting Lessons* Jurich tackles two exhibitions and one film which thematize the terror of the Serbian military inflicted on Muslim civilians in Bosnia during the 1990’s war. The fact that neither the horrors of war nor the horrors of torture and murder of unarmed people as such aren’t motifs in horror fiction, did not deter the author from basing her analysis of the suffering of Muslim civilians and artistic representations of the “genocide” of Bosnians on the perspective of scientific and philosophical works about the specificities of the horror aesthetic and the epistemology of horror stories. The result of such an undertaking is more than illuminating and is worthy of a place in the special edition of this publication dedicated to horror stories.

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Thanks to the generous support of the editor in chief Dragana Antonijević, the field of anthropology of horror, although insufficiently researched, has with this thematic issue finally gotten scientific recognition in our country. Each of the papers in this issue of *Issues in Ethnology and Anthropology* is the result of the hard work of their authors who, with little or no theoretical background in anthropological studies, conducted pioneering research in the attempt to answer the riddles of the genre they deemed important. While eagerly expecting a future, more encompassing synthesis, we remain in the hope that this thematic issue will serve as firm conceptual support for further research.

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