

Ksenia Olkusz

Around literary and film horror

Review: Anita Has-Tokarz, *Horror w literaturze współczesnej i filmie*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, Lublin 2011, 494 pp.

In her monograph *Horror w literaturze współczesnej i filmie* (Horror in contemporary literature and film), Anita Has-Tokarz sets off to penetrate areas which have long been omitted by the Polish researchers and, thus, little known.¹ She explores the realm of horror, focusing on literature and film and their characteristics. At the same time, it is worth noting that “researchers who study this type of texts underline the difficulty of defining horror as this term refers both to literary and film phenomena, and if we take into consideration that it is also a kind of way of presenting and describing reality, art in general will be included into its meaning.”²

Has-Tokarz’s purpose is to find and analyse the distinctive features and changes which can be observed in modern horror fiction and films. At the same time, one must note that “the relation between the horror film and horror literature has been quite intimate during the current horror cycle — both in the obvious sense that often horror films are adapted from horror novels, and in the sense that many of the writers in the genre were deeply influenced by earlier horror movie cycles — to which they refer not only in interviews but within the texts of their novels as well.”³ Has-Tokarz also wants to discover the causes of the surge in interest in them. As she points out, horror fiction and films are informed by identical factors, so both draw on similar types of situations, characters, motifs, and visual realisations. The research involved books and films from before 2006, about a thousand titles by the author’s reckoning. Such a rich body of material makes possible an in-depth analysis and the backing of propositions with examples. The only drawback is that the author focuses chiefly on foreign books and films, almost neglecting (with a few exceptions) the domestic output. The 2006 boundary also raises questions: there seem to be no practical or logical grounds for it. With such a broad topic and thoroughgoing research it definitely deserves some explanation. Similarly, the selection of books, culturally diverse, appears random and seems to lack any methodological backup.

The book is divided into five broad chapters, each dealing specifically with the issue presented as its title. The discussion begins with theoretical and methodological reflection, focusing on genre taxonomy and quoting numerous theories of horror formula in literature and film. The thorough bibliographical search allows Has-Tokarz to look at the issue from

¹ One of the few Polish studies of that matter is *Od gotycyzmu do horroru. Wilkołak, wampir i Monstrum Frankensteina w wybranych utworach* (Wrocław 2008) by Anna Gemra.

² K. Walc, *Horror*, [entry in:] T. Żabski, *Słownik literatury popularnej*, Wrocław 2006, p. 222, trans. K.O. W oryginale: „Badacze zajmujący się tą odmianą tekstów podkreślają trudności zdefiniowania horroru, ponieważ termin ten odnosi się zarówno do zjawisk literackich, jak i filmowych, a jeśli weźmiemy pod uwagę, że jest to również pewien sposób przedstawiania i opisywania rzeczywistości, w obręb znaczeniowy pojęcia zostanie włączona sztuka w ogóle”.

³ N. Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart*, New York-London 1990, p. 2.

various angles. She successfully places horror in the net of genre taxonomy, pointing to its origins and the transformations of its perception. Building up a paradigm, she refers to numerous definitions proposed by Polish and foreign researchers and, as a result, achieves a multifaceted presentation of the issue.

The second chapter presents the history of horror fiction and film, focusing on their origins and development. This chapter's important asset is a detailed description of the beginnings and subsequent growth of horror cinema and its contemporary condition. In the subchapter *Horror w polskiej tradycji literackiej i filmowej* (Horror in the Polish literary and cinematic tradition) Has-Tokarz deals synthetically with the issue within the domestic context.

The next chapter, *Poetyka i estetyka świata przedstawionego w horrorze* (Poetics and aesthetics of the fictional world in horror), analyses selected narrative formulae of the genre. The author deals chiefly with atmosphere-creating elements: space, shock categories, grossness. A whole subchapter discusses the ways in which tension and horror mood are built.

The fourth chapter presents horror's significant creatures: vampires, werewolves, demons, and an assortment of monsters whose function is to terrify. An important role is also played by serial killers, shown as the embodiment of utter evil. The analyses of literary and filmic material are made thoroughly and meticulously — each time the author sketches a picture of the social-mental background, backing herself up with numerous and well selected examples.

A similar research method can be found in the last chapter, *Teksty grozy w komunikacji społecznej* (Horror texts in social communication), which sums up findings of the previous chapters. The author's task, excellently executed, was to define the role played and place occupied in culture by horror fiction and film. She has attempted to classify the ways and types of reception of horror texts which she puts in the media and popular culture context.

Has-Tokarz's monograph is without doubt useful and important for the study of horror. It deals with a large body of material, provides the reader with numerous and well selected examples, and puts forward precisely formulated propositions. However, the author's insistence on presenting a lot of literary and filmic figures, plot patterns and spatial arrangements may at times be tiring and even unsettling. Unsettling, because it turns the book into a series of summaries of plots of culture texts — instead of analyses and interpretations. There are also instances of inaccurate genre classification, as if the author wanted too much to make a work fit a particular theory. This can be especially seen in the subchapter on serial murderers where the author refers to works from outside of the genre of horror. There are also minor, but numerous, factual mistakes, especially in the titles of films and books. Besides, the issues dealt with in the last chapter do not seem fully researched. The author draws on the existing opinions and propositions without contributing any fresh observations. Thus, the last chapter seems unnecessary as it only recounts the views and theses already presented in the preceding chapters.

Summing up, Has-Tokarz has researched horror thoroughly and meticulously, which has allowed her to draw firm, accurately formulated conclusions. In this way she has achieved her goal — to define the basic components of literary and film horror, trace its intra-generic changes, and explain the reasons for horror's growing popularity. If only the author matched her exhaustive research with some aesthetic assessment of the works she discusses.