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## **HORROR GENRE IN NATIONAL CINEMAS OF EAST SLAVIC COUNTRIES**

In this essay I would like to outline several tendencies one can observe in contemporary horror films from three former Soviet republics: Belarus, Russia and Ukraine. These observations are meant to chart the recent (2000-onwards) development of horror as a genre of mainstream cinema, and what cultural, social and political forces shape its development. Horror film is of particular interest to me because it is a popular genre known for a long and interesting history in American cinema. In addition, horror is one of transnational genres that infuse Hollywood formula with particularities of national cinematic traditions (most notable example is East Asian horror cinema, namely “J-horror,” Japanese horror). To understand the peculiarity of the newly emerged horror genre in the cinemas of East Slavic countries, I propose two venues of exploration, or two perspectives. The first one could be called the global perspective: horror film, as it exists today in post-Soviet space, is profoundly influenced by Hollywood. Domestic productions compete with American films at the box office and strive to emulate genre structures of Hollywood to attract viewers, whose tastes are largely shaped by American films. This is especially true for horror, which has almost no reference point in national cinematic traditions in question. The second vantage point is local: the local specificity of these horror narratives, how the films reflect their own cultural condition, shaped by today’s globalized cinema market, Hollywood hegemony and local sensibilities of distinct cinematic and pop-culture traditions. The transformations the horror genre undergoes in East Slavic countries will be the principal subject of my paper.

## 1. HISTORY OF HORROR IN SOVIET AND POST-SOVIET CINEMA

Despite its rich cinematic legacy, Soviet cinema as a whole, as well as individual cinemas of the republics, avoided certain genres. For well-known ideological reasons, Soviet cinema had no erotic films or pornography, no martial arts films or violent thrillers. Horror was also a taboo genre, partly for censorship of violent and fantastic elements,<sup>1</sup> and, no doubt, due to a politically overseen and regulated culture industry that was steered towards education and propaganda rather than violent and sexualized entertainment. Censorship also prevented foreign horror from reaching Soviet screens until late 1980s–early 1990s. While horror did not exist in a straightforward fashion, there were films that made good use of horror elements and integrated them into local cinematic traditions.

One of the most notable examples is *Viy* (Ershov and Korpachev 1967), a Russian-language adaptation of the short story by Nikolai Gogol. The story is based on Ukrainian folklore and is a typical 19th century Romantic narrative that combines supernatural and mystical with the interest in folk traditions and beliefs. It tells of an exorcism that a monk performs over a body of a young dead witch. The witch attempts to resist purification of her soul with all sorts of black magic, finally appealing to the demonic creature “Viy,” with enormous heavy lids, who spots the monk in the magic circle, overpowers his prayer and kills him. *Viy* is probably the only Soviet film that could be identified as a horror proper: it aims to scare the viewer with supernatural elements and makes good use of suspense. The unique standing of *Viy* in Russian and Ukrainian horror tradition could be explained by the fact that it was produced and intended as an adaptation of a literary classic that just happens to be a horror story. *Viy* seems to be in many ways a foundational text for the horror tradition in Russia, where two remakes were made: one is called *The Witch* [Ved'ma] (Fesenko 2006), and another remake, also entitled *Viy*, was released in 3D in 2014.

In Belarus a horror-hybrid film *The Wild Hunt of King Stakh* [Dzikae paliavanne karalia Stakha] (Rubinchik 1979), based on a contemporary novel by a Belarusian writer Vitaliy Karatkevich, uses elements of Gothic horror to create a suspenseful drama. The film engages various classic Gothic elements: a spooky legend of a haunted family, a young impressionable woman, who lives alone in a Gothic mansion and is a victim of the ancient curse. The film, however, resolves the horror story as a malevolent conspiracy and social critique rather than a supernatural mystical occurrence. The “wild hunt” — a ghostly vengeful haunting of the cursed family — turns out to be merely a ploy meant to drive the heiress out to appropriate the estate.

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<sup>1</sup> Josephine Woll, “Exorcising the Devil: Russian Cinema and Horror.” *Horror International*. Ed. Steven Jay Schneider and Tony Williams. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2005. 336–358.

*The Wild Hunt* could not have survived the Soviet censorship as a Gothic horror, but instead needed to be anchored in social drama and mystery.

Similarly, a masterpiece of Ukrainian poetic cinema *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* [Tini zabutykh predkiv] (Paradjanov 1964) contains mystical supernatural elements fused with Ukrainian folklore, rather than relies on the supernatural as a vehicle for a horror story. *Shadows* is yet another adaptation of the Ukrainian classic by Mikhailo Kotsiubynski, and is a story of doomed lovers. While the young man is away, his beloved, feeling abandoned, commits suicide, and haunts the hero throughout the film as both a scary presence and a painful longing for love and connection that is forever lost. When the ghost finally claims him in the forest, as they both sing song of love, it might be one of the scariest scenes of the Soviet cinema. The man is in the dry and barren forest, a dead grove, and as he and the ghost communicate through song, we see two pale female hands extending rapidly amidst dead branches until the abrupt cut makes us believe that they have seized their pray.



Figure 1. Ghost from *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*

The use of montage and off-screen space makes this scene rather scary, but it does not make the film into a horror movie. Moreover, it would be difficult to envision a devotion to a popular genre in *Shadows*, an art film by Sergei Paradzhanov, a re-

nown auteur, later persecuted by the Soviet authorities. The film is dense, poetic and meditative rather than suspenseful and plot driven.

In general, in Soviet cinema, we cannot speak about horror genre as it became known in the West, but of horror hybrids, or horror elements that sometimes found their way into sci-fi films, such as *The Amphibian Man* [Chelovek amfibiia] (Kazan-sky and Chebotarev 1961) or *Testament of Professor Dowel* [Zaveshchanie profes-sora Douelia] (Menaker 1984); and detective films like *Ten Little Indians* [Desiat' negritiat] (Govorukhin 1987), or *The Hound of Baskerville* [Sobaka Baskervillei] (Maslennikov 1981). There horror genre was present in a limited fashion, its purpose was to intensify suspense and mystery meant to be resolved in a plausible logical or scientific fashion, rather than to shock and scare the audience.

While the horror tradition in the Soviet republics has a limited presence, since the fall of the Soviet Union several films have consciously set out to inaugurate post-Soviet horror genre in the 1990s. The lifting of censorship and the influx of mainstream movies of all sorts (including B-movies) provided many examples of Western-style popular genres. However, the collapse of the centralized and state-sponsored film industry along with the economic crisis of the 1990s resulted in drastically diminished number of movie-goers, extreme lack of funds, failing technology and eventually record low numbers of domestic productions. The crisis hit the film studios in the republics particularly badly as opposed to two Soviet major studios in Moscow and Petersburg, which probably explains why most of the 1990s horror films were made in Russia. These were not many either, most notable are the supernatural thriller *The Touch* [Prikosnovenie] (Mkrтчan 1992) about the dead controlling the world of the living, the serial killer slasher *Snake's Source* [Zmeinyi istochnik] (Lebedev 1997), and the mystic allegory *Mister Decorator* [Gospodin oformitel'] (Teptsov 1988). As the conditions for producing and distributing the films worsened, the post-Soviet horror films were quickly forgotten, unable to reach and attract mainstream audience, derided for their poor execution, unappealing stories, poor acting, and backwards technology.

With the advent of a more prosperous era, economically speaking, the film industry in the former Soviet republics has started its recovery. This recovery is not even, with Russia having a stronger industry than Ukraine or Belarus, the latter being in the worst shape of all, its industry mostly serving as a cheaper shooting ground for Russian TV and movie projects. That is also why in this paper Ukraine and Belarus are each represented by one horror film: Belarusian *Masakra* (Kudzinenka 2010) and Ukrainian *The Pit* [Shtol'nya] (Kobylchuk 2006) are unique examples of the genre. However, Russia to date has produced about a dozen horror films or horror hybrids. In the early 2000s, as the financial situation improves, the viewers return to movie theatres, the demand for the home-grown popular culture in film, television and mass media also grows, and we see the return of the horror genre still mostly in a modest budget category with limited viewer appeal. Contemporary horror, however, is often technologically advanced, for example, the second Ukrainian horror film released in

2013, *Synevyr*, is done in 3D. Well-done special effects and fast paced editing also contribute to the blockbuster status of the Russian hit fantasy-horror *Night and Day Watch* [Nochnoi dozor; Dnevnoi dozor] (Bekmambetov 2004, 2006). In what follows I will delineate what I consider some of defining features of contemporary horror productions in Belarus, Russia and Ukraine through case studies of the following films: Belarusian *Masakra* (2010), Russian *S.S.D.* [Death to Soviet Children — Smert' sovetским detiam] (Shmelev 2008), and Ukrainian *The Pit* (2006).

## 2. THE GLOBAL: HOLLYWOOD AND THE “POWER OF ALLUSION”

As many other countries across the globe, former Soviet republics are not an exception to Hollywood global expansion and hegemony in the sphere of popular culture. Indeed, Hollywood dominance has been directly compared to colonialism in scholarship.<sup>2</sup> The term “global” in relation to Hollywood in many ways means its position of power in comparison to local cinemas. The “global” in Hollywood cinema is about having mostly Hollywood cinema in all corners of the world. Hollywood films dominate local cinema markets, take the lion share of box office profit, and outnumber the local productions almost in all categories (budget, box office, popularity etc). For example, in 2011, sixty three Russian films earned 166.4 million, which made up only 14.5% of all revenue on the Russian cinema market, while the production costs for the Russian films were 249 million, with only ten films earning more than their budgets.<sup>3</sup> This picture is rather typical, it gets marginally better or worse throughout years, but is consistent, and it is even more drastic in less financially stable industries of Belarus and Ukraine. Unlike local cinema industry Hollywood often has the resources and finances to create self-perpetuating media cycles around films, expansive franchises and, in general, to set the terms of language and structure of popular entertainment, or be the „lingua franca”<sup>4</sup> of mainstream cinema.

This is especially true when we look at the horror genre in three former Soviet countries. Because horror had very limited local tradition, it is even more derivative than other popular genres with established reference point in local film history. Furthermore, the question that the filmmakers and movie-goers have to ask themselves is why one would watch a Ukrainian, Russian or Belarusian horror film? This

<sup>2</sup> See Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> The information is taken from the Russian site that tracks box office statistics for both foreign and domestic productions, and the statistics of various distributors and production companies: [www.kinobusiness.com](http://www.kinobusiness.com).

<sup>4</sup> David Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006.

question is not as simple as it seems, because, on the one hand, majority of horror films have to have a recognizable stamp of the Hollywood genre, the familiar point of reference of what “good” horror looks like. On the other hand, why would viewers watch a Ukrainian or a Russian film that is just like a Hollywood film, in other words, why settle for a copy if you can watch the original? The local productions appear to be in a double-bind: they have to be just like Hollywood horror films, but at the same time serve as the site of difference and distinction for their viewers, to signal that it is a “good horror,” on par with Hollywood, but it is at the same time “our horror.” The horror films, therefore, become the sites of both difference and repetition, conformity and subversion. The globalized condition of both Hollywood and local cinemas, while not equal in many respects, allows for creative appropriation rather than mindless replication of cinematic conventions. As Thomas Elsaesser writes: “national cinemas and Hollywood not only [are] communicating vessels, but... [exist] in a space set up like a hall of mirrors, in which recognition, imaginary identity and mis-cognition enjoy equal status, creating value out of pure difference.”<sup>5</sup> It is not simply a black-and-white matter of blind adherence to Hollywood standards and acceptance of its hegemony. I will try to show that, while it might not be a dialogue of equal parties, it is still a more complicated process that involves fluid and constantly shifting paradigms and values of today’s globalized and interconnected popular media. First, I will look at the specificity of Hollywood mimicry in the horror films from Belarus, Russia and Ukraine, and then, at the strategies that enable those films to become the site of difference.

One of the most obvious ways to transplant the horror genre to post-Soviet cinema is through its narrative structures. Narrative patterns determine the type and the plot of the horror story, whether it is a slasher horror, a supernatural horror, a monster horror or a Gothic horror, and various subdivisions, such as the “evil child” horror films, the “found tape” horror films, vampire, zombie or werewolf monster variety etc. Similarly, to be recognized as a horror genre, the films need to follow predictable patterns established in American cinema. Various post-Soviet horror films have followed these established patterns.

Ukrainian *The Pit* is a slasher horror. *Halloween* (Carpenter 1978), *Friday the Thirteenth* (Cunningham 1980), *Nightmare on Elm Street* (Craven 1984), *Scream* (Craven 1996) are all classics of the slasher genre. *The Pit* tells the story of the archeology students, who get lost in the vast network of WWII underground tunnels, where a serial killer from a pagan cult hunts them down, allegedly avenging the persecution of his people by the “mainstream” Christianity. Carol Clover has argued that the slasher film, while predicated on all sorts of gratuitous violence perpetrated by a mysterious killer against teenage victims, always leaves a “final girl” — a su-

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2007, p. 47.



rvivor, who vanquishes the monster.<sup>6</sup> In the *Pit*, we have the “final couple” — a boy and a girl, who bond over their misadventures, and both escape the raging maniac.

*S.S.D.* (abbreviated from Russian as “Death to Soviet Children” or “The Scariest Day”), is also a slasher. This Russian film focuses on a group of teenagers who are duped into joining a reality show that takes place in a Soviet abandoned young communist or “pioneer” camp, where they are hunted by a serial killer, who kills them according to different “scary tales.” Scary tales belong to the urban folklore genre that graphically narrates about various uncanny events and deaths that befall unsuspecting and careless children. Interestingly, this film also leaves a “final couple” behind; in the end they exact an equally bloody revenge on the maniac. Similarly, in another Russian horror film, *Trackman* [Putevoi obkhodchik] (Shavlak 2007), a gang of robbers and their female hostages are lost in the Moscow underground, where a killer pursues them: only the male protagonist and his hostage-turned-girlfriend, escape.

Carol Clover writes from the feminist standpoint that the figure of the final girl introduces female empowerment and identification for the viewer to the horror genre that is otherwise predicated on female objectification and victimization, when women are punished for taking control of their sexuality. The final girl takes an active stand and often reverses the hunter and the pray dynamics, turning the tables on the killer. Clover writes that the final girl emerges victorious but “masculinized,” for example, she is often seen wielding phallic weapons (like knives). In addition, she is always alone, as her romantic interest usually perishes or, as seen in the *Scream*, for example, is himself the killer. Ukrainian and Russian horror films persistently introduce different dynamics that emphasize male protagonist, while women are usually given the role of a sidekick. These are more conservative gender dynamics that do not allow women to act as independent agents.

In the *Pit*, the main female character is a proverbial blonde, who tries to act as a voice of reason for the group of teenagers as they encounter various obstacles and dangers in the tunnels. However, it is the underdog and the nerdy male protagonist who comes up with virtually all solutions to the situations of danger, or when teenagers start turning on each other. Because of his ingenuity he wins the heart of the blonde heroine and eventually rescues her and himself. *S.S.D.* uses the same strategy: when the male protagonist is the only character who actively fights the maniac and kills his apprentice. It is also revealed in the story that the protagonist hacked into the reality show database to ensure his and his girlfriend’s selection. His girlfriend is pregnant, which emphasizes her femininity, and passively suffers through the whole ordeal and relies on her boyfriend’s resourcefulness and strength. Interestingly, it is the girlfriend who allegedly becomes the carrier of demonic influence passed on to the next serial killer, emphasizing her passive involvement in the evil

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<sup>6</sup> Carol J. Clover. *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in Modern Horror Film*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1993.

the male hero tries to vanquish. The difficulty, which both Russian and Ukrainian films have with the classic slasher trope of the final girl, suggests that the films have trouble envisioning an independent female protagonist that can act on her own. They suggest that fighting evil is not really a “woman’s job,” a conservative attitude that indicates entrenchment of the patriarchal values in post-Soviet societies, which is often acknowledged in scholarship as well.

The only horror film from Belarus to date is *Masakra* (2010). Unlike most other post-Soviet horror films, it does not feature contemporary settings with teenage or very young protagonists. *Masakra* is set in the 19th century, is closer to Gothic horror and structurally reminds of the Dracula narrative. A metropolitan dweller and acon artist from Saint Petersburg arrives to Belarusian provinces, where he is hosted by a local count, whose Gothic mansion harbours dark secrets. A series of uncanny events ensues, and it becomes apparent that the count and his kin are cursed to turn into bears, or are “were-bears.” Even though the Russian con man prevails over the Belarusian bear family, and rescues the Polish princess the count was engaged to, viewers’ sympathies predictably lie with the brooding melancholy count. Even his fiancée goes mad from grief and seeks bear company after her rescue. *Masakra* story is very much aligned with the Dracula narrative<sup>7</sup> and the variations of vampire stories that are a staple of popular culture today.

The defining feature of the horror films in question is not only their predictable adherence to the pre-existent narrative structures. This is not surprising for any horror film; the predictability of horror narrative and personages has long become a subject of tongue-in-cheek parody, as seen in the recent horror *Cabin in the Woods* (Goddard 2012). A more interesting feature that distinguishes the horror from post-Soviet countries is certain excess that, in my opinion, characterizes its narrative borrowing. It seems as if the films aim to “stuff” as much genre tropes, clichés and intertextual references in their stories as possible. A vivid case in point is a Russian blockbusting duology, *Night and Day Watch*. It is a story of a superhuman race that lives alongside humans and wages millennia-old battle for domination and the fate of the human-kind. Not only the film itself is a hybrid of fantasy and horror genres, which is not that uncommon since genres are not set in stone, and their boundaries are often and productively blurry, but what is more interesting is the character development in the story. The superhuman “others,” as they are called, are in some ways like superheroes, possessing supernatural abilities to be used for policing purposes; they are also like pop-culturized ancient gods, who fight and bicker mostly between themselves; they are also powerful wizards with a variety of magic abilities; in addition, they are also vampires, whose relationship with each other and humans as pray is complicated. In short, the characters are defined through multiple traditions and narratives of popular culture, all of which are stuffed, not entirely seamlessly, in one package.

<sup>7</sup> Originating with Stoker’s novel *Dracula* (1897).



Similar tendencies could be observed in the *Pit*, which combines survival thriller elements with a typical slasher horror story. The teenagers stranded in the tunnels do not perish only because of the homicidal maniac, most of the time their perils are entirely self-inflicted or result from natural obstacles (such as flooding, sewer rats invasion etc). Teenagers find old food cans and eat them, or they procure a WWII machine gun and, of course, use it most unwisely. The truth is the serial killer does not have to do much to harm the hapless teens. The two sets of narratives compete and in many ways reflect on the film unfavourably, because the thrills of horror are gone when the suspense is dealt with rationally and without delay. The engagement the viewer feels while watching a survival thriller: “what would they do to fight the rats?” is tempered by the irrational expectation of the horror genre, when the viewers ask themselves: “who cares about the rats if there is a maniac on the loose?”

Russian *S.S.D.* also engages several narrative threads: a traditional slasher story and a social critique that points out the voyeuristic nature of reality television, which enables the murderous rampage. Along with those principal ideas, there is also an extra narrative line introduced by a parallel montage of police investigation, and a mystery thriller element of the “third man,” a killer’s apprentice, inside the group. On top of that, the film introduces a demonic possession story line as a cliff hanger at the very end of the film. In a similar fashion *Masakra*, on top of a sombre Gothic tale, introduces a second incongruously carnivalesque narrative line about an affair between the servants of the count and the con artist, very much in the vein of classic commedia dell’arte. Smart and mischievous servants engage in steamy sexual scenes and trickster-worthy manipulations, while their masters brood and decipher mysteries.

The tendency of excessive overuse of popular culture tropes, genre patterns and reference points is evident not only in narrative structures, but also in visual solutions the films offer. This tendency becomes apparent as early as the promotion and posters, or credits of the films. For example, the poster for *The Pit* is clearly referencing the *Scream* movies. The poster for *Day Watch*, the video game, combines elements from at least three cult films: *Matrix* (Wachowsky 1999), *Lord of the Rings* (Jackson 2001–2003) and *Star Wars* (Lucas 1977–onwards). The credit sequence for the Russian *Trackman* is played out to an eerie children’s song, alluding to *Nightmare on Elm Street*. The first thing we see in *Masakra* is an image of a count’s butler in a coffin-like bathtub, the butler looks almost exactly like the celebrated Nosferatu from the eponymous classic by F.W. Murnau (1922). The count’s guests are killed in a sequence that borrows from Edgar A. Poe *The Masque of the Red Death* (1842), also made into an American horror film. *S.S.D.* uses a masked killer, whose appearance approximates the masked killer from the classic *Halloween* series. These references are not difficult to spot and they are meant to be easily accessible for viewer’s immediate recognition. In other words, these narrative and visual markers display the awareness of both the horror genre and the Western popular culture in general that the film boasts. This intertextual playful awareness in itself

is nothing new, and is common in today's Hollywood cinema, postmodern art, or in fluid hybrid “mediascapes,”<sup>8</sup> in which various texts engage with each other, and it is impossible to establish a clear-cut path from original to the copy and back. The question is, then, how is post-Soviet horror different?



Figure 2. *The Pit* poster

Post-Soviet horror films deliberately create a network of allusions and references, establishing a context for the film that makes it a self-aware part of the Western horror tradition and Western-style popular entertainment. The difference is that Hollywood allusion to itself is usually endowed with self-referential irony: it is done so the film and the viewers partake in common knowledge of the cinematic illusion. Post-Soviet horror films need these allusions to legitimize themselves as popular entertainment. The appropriation of foreign context, the donning of a foreign mask, comes with excess — the films overcompensate with visual allusions and narrative twists suggestive of many other films, as if their creators are unsure if the viewer would really “get” this message unless the film addresses its own perceived lack. Repetition, allusion, mimicry are legitimizing

<sup>8</sup> James Naremore, *More than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts*. Berkeley: University of California, 1998.

strategies, and that is why they often lack the ironic self-reflexivity, they are too earnest. The Nosferatu butler from *Masakra* continues to act like Nosferatu until the end of the film; this allusion is not resolved or anchored in understanding that German Expressionist imagery in a Belarusian film from 2010 is out of place if it is taken seriously. The children's song in *Trackman's* credits, or the masked killer in *S.S.D.* form an integral part of the narrative, there is no pause for reflection about their role, or the ironic gaze they may cast.

Fredric Jameson has famously defined pastiche as a “blank parody,” a “neutral practice of mimicry,” a parody without satire, without an implicit norm, which anchors the ironic gaze.<sup>9</sup> While Jameson applies this term to postmodern aesthetics in general, he also links it to what he calls “nostalgic films.” Cult film series such as *Star Wars* or *Indiana Jones*, in Jameson's view, represent the nostalgic pastiche, as they replicate the lost cultural conventions of the 1930s–1940s. They do so without subversion or parody, but through nostalgic appropriation of the cultural “lost land” for viewer's imagination, a fantasy of reliving the past, which is also “tinted golden” by nostalgia. In certain respects, I believe, the same applies to post-Soviet horror, only it engages not a nostalgic view of the past, but an imaginary idealized view of mass culture of the West, exemplified by Hollywood as the golden standard of



Figure 3. *Day Watch* poster

<sup>9</sup> Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society.” *The Anti-Aesthetic. Essays on Postmodern Culture*. Ed. Hal Foster. Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983.



Figure 4. *Masakra Nosferatu* Butler



Figure 5. *Masakra Nosferatu* Butler



Figure 6. *S.S.D.* Masked Killer

popular entertainment. This is not an entirely new exercise for East Slavic cultures, as Western culture has always been a point of cultural conditioning and intense interest, re-invented and re-imagined behind the Iron Curtain and many times before. Hollywood itself, of course, is not an illusion, but a very real financial and cultural force. However, what post-Soviet horror seeks is a vision of Hollywood recreated in its own imagination, that is why this horror aims to encompass so many various popular forms and tends to be almost literal in its visual strategies. If, according to Jameson, *Star Wars* are an over-the-top narrative, indulging the nostalgic vision of imagined history, so post-Soviet horror is an over-the-top indulgence in fantasy about popular culture, where all possible stories happen at once, and everyone's favourite images migrate from film to film. At the same time, in my opinion, there is also an element of subversion in this endeavour, because imagined Hollywood — where stories and visuals are directly transplanted from Western films to East Slavic films — is also an appropriation, a gesture of making Hollywood one's own, an exercise in control over things that are generally not easy to control (such as box office revenues, or viewers preferences for American genre films). And this is one possible venue for post-Soviet horror to become a site of difference.

### 3. THE LOCAL: HISTORY AND HORROR STORY

I have outlined the general commonalities that the horror films from East Slavic countries share in relation to Hollywood cinema, but the question remains, what local specifics these films display to diversify the formulaic approach to horror and to make their films a site of difference. In short, what would make a horror film Belarusian, Russian or Ukrainian as envisioned by the filmmakers? It is important to note here, that while I have talked about Hollywood mimicry in post-Soviet films in general, this should not cast doubts on the fact that these are distinct and different national cinemas, with distinct histories, and present challenges. As we turn to the case studies of three horror films from Belarus, Russia and Ukraine, one thing that they have in common is the engagement of local history as the source of their local identity. It is, perhaps, unsurprising that one of the ways to corroborate the local specificity is to engage history and employ visions of national past for construction of "local horror." However, each film pursues a different path in such appropriation of history.

Belarusian *Masakra* almost immediately positions itself within colonial problematic. The film is done in three languages: Belarusian is the language of the count, the were-bears and locals; Russian is the language of the con artist, an impostor, who pretends to be a professor from Petersburg, Russian is also the language of visiting imperial officials, who complain of being "exiled" to the "wilderness," and who are executed in the haunted mansion; finally, Polish is the language of the count's fiancée and her governess. The languages exist in obvious opposition. The con



artist arrives to the Belarusian provinces as a metropolitan dweller with a “civilizing mission” (Homi Bhabha) towards the inferior and backwards colonies. His sense of superiority is underscored when he attempts to impress the count by citing verse of the famous Russian poet, Alexander Pushkin, mostly grotesquely out of place. He justifies his deception of the count by his love for art and the need to raise money to go to Florence to study it. As the con man pretends to catalogue count’s library, it is clear that he is incompetent, while his servant, who learnt to read Latin to help his master in college, deciphers the ancient texts and exposes the were-bear curse. As the metropolitan guest’s sense of “high culture” is exposed as ridiculous by the film, it is also obvious that this “important person from the capital” is an impostor, a scam artist who is there to rip the count off. In an unambiguous way the film suggests that the colonization is a fraud that is perpetuated to deceive the local colonized population rather than carry the torch of civilization to the dark corners, as the colonial discourse would have it. The vengeance exacted in the haunted mansion by the mysterious forces against imposed government officials and their escorts is yet another metaphor — even the supernatural forces do not take kindly to oppressors.

The Gothic story of the film curiously mirrors and polemicizes with an earlier Belarusian Gothic mystery *The Wild Hunt of King Stakh*. The haunted mansion in the depth of Belarusian provinces, the family curse lasting for generations, folk legends interwoven into the narrative, even the spooky pale servants clad in black are found in both films. However, in the *Wild Hunt*, a visiting ethnographer, who uncovers the conspiracy and saves the young woman, is a hero with a civilizing and rational mission. He fights against the local plotting nobility entrenched in backwards customs, prejudices and legends. Some thirty years later, *Masakra* reverses this arrangement: the civilizing mission becomes a fraud, while backward customs and legends acquire a sense of strength and authenticity. The count, unlike the young woman in the *Wild Hunt*, does not need to be saved, but he needs to choose either to have a “normal” life in exile with his fiancée, or to stay in Belarus and forever remain under the curse of a were-bear, hoping, as his mother suggests, “that the land will give him strength.” It is hard not to read political subtext of the present totalitarian conditions in Belarus in his dilemma: does one simply leave Belarus to have anormal life, or does one stay in the native land but in a mutilated state of half-human half-animal? The fact that the film chooses bears instead of wolves for the obvious werewolf horror trope suggests that this painful condition is also a result of colonial policies: the animalization of the colonized as subhuman, since bear is a symbolic national animal of Russia, not Belarus. Throughout the film the count continues to brood over these impossible questions, like most vampire-variety characters do (one needs only think of *Twilight*), without reaching any solution. The questions the film implicitly poses are an exercise in political geography, and metaphors for political choices one might be forced to make in Belarus today: there is Russian empire, which prevails, as the con artist extinguishes the count; the exile, associated with



Poland, that will possibly drive one insane, since the Polish princess goes mad; the cursed and haunted Belarus, where inexplicable uncontrollable things happen. As almost everyone in the film perishes or goes insane, the remaining character, the priest, escapes to join the Garibaldi army in Italy. Perhaps, the film suggests with its final scene, filled with sun, in contrast to the darkness and spookiness of the Belarusian scenes, that the revolt, the revolution, is also a choice.



Figure 7. *Masakra* Mad Fiancee and the Bear

*Masakra* is in many ways an over-the-top deliberate palimpsest of Dracula narrative, commedia dell'arte, German Expressionism and Hollywood horror, but its horror story is entrenched in Belarusian history and the trauma of colonialism, its consequences stretching to the present totalitarian state. Through its linguistic strategies and character configuration the film looks at the colonial lay-out of choices and draws a parallel with today's politics. It is not surprising that traumatic events require traumatic excessive genres, and horror as a reflection of national traumatic history has been studied in scholarship.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, *Masakra*'s local appeal is to tackle the trauma of local history, the "accursed" questions that always configure themselves to the same answers in imperial Russia or today's Belarus. Traumatic history, in short, finds a venue of expression through horror story.

Russian *S.S.D.* begins in the 1980s in the real pioneer camp. In reference to *Friday the Thirteenth* series, the summer recreational space for children becomes the haunted grounds for their young caretakers, and in the first few minutes of the film the female instructor is killed, while having sex. Then the film cuts to two scared boys who tell each other scary tales and one of them confirms that it is "all true." The film continues in the present day, when the reality show participants are hunted one by one

<sup>10</sup> For examples see Adam Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005; or Robin Wood, *The American Nightmare: Horror in the 70s. Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*. New York: Columbia UP, 1986. 70–94.

via methods delineated in various children's scary tales to killer's amusement. The film seems to capitalize on a cultural contrast: the present day culture of the reality show and the culture of the past, embodied both by the space of the pioneer camp, and the discourse of scary tales. The today's consumer media culture is presented as ethically questionable, when the participants are subjected to constant surveillance (the *Big Brother* is mentioned as a model for the show). At the same time the victims themselves eagerly engage in the ruthless process of back-stabbing for money and later for their lives (as they try to vote out the next victim to satisfy the killer). Today's culture of entertainment and voyeurism usurps the space of yesterday's culture of discipline and conformity, when the reality show is set in the old pioneer camp. Predictably this encounter does not bode well for everyone involved.

The setting of the film is old, dilapidated grounds of the camp, with visible remnants of the old civilization: the gigantic portraits of young communist heroes, faded communist slogans, small crammed rooms and uncomfortable washroom facilities. The killer, like a true totalitarian Soviet "big brother," watches everyone and communicates his verdicts via intercom in a disembodied voice, something that possibly could have transpired in real young communist summer camps, minus the killing. As we see the teenagers in that space, wearing fashionable clothes and sporting various un-Soviet identities (one boy is a goth, another girl dresses provocatively), the contrast becomes jarring. The dichotomy of then and now is also underscored spatially: today's glamour TV studio space and abandoned dirty campgrounds of the past. The horror story happens when the "now" and "then" collide.



Figure 8. *S.S.D.* characters against an old board saying

This dichotomy is interestingly consistent throughout several other Russian horror films. *Trackman* takes place underground in the tunnels of the fabled Moscow metro, built during the reign of Stalin, and a subject of many urban legends. This underground looks old and decrepit and is a symbol of forgotten civilization, to which the character "Trackman" belongs: he is revealed to be a Chernobyl rescue

worker who escaped government secret facilities underground. This dangerous old underground space is contrasted with ordinary Moscow above the ground, and the space of bank robbery, which takes place in a slick and modern building. *Day and Night Watch* have been argued to portray good vampires or “night watch” as nostalgically Soviet (through details in their clothes, technology, vehicles), and bad guys or “day watch” as Russian nouveau-riches, leading lives of luxury and excess).<sup>11</sup> Similarly in *S.S.D.* the serial killer, whose presence drives the plot of the slasher, emerges when the two worlds collide and the old meets the new. The killer is revealed to be the boy who witnessed the killing of the camp instructor and vowed to believe in all the scary tales, and who later became a television producer to make the show. Like other Russian films mentioned above, *S.S.D.* makes a very clear distinction between the old and the new, the past and the present, both through its visuals and storytelling. However, unlike *Watch* duology, it does not mark the binaries as “good” or “bad,” or positions the old as abjection, discarded out of sight, as in *Trackman*. On the contrary, the film seems to be interested in the junction of the two: the killer serves as a mediator between the world of the old and the new, and this is when the horror story is born. It is born out of the meeting of the past and present, the world of Soviet youth camps, epitomized by the scary tales, and the world of today’s youth-oriented media culture, embodied in the reality show. The film, in a sense, equates them both: the conformist Soviet culture is just as brainwashing as the consumerist culture of today. What I find most interesting in *S.S.D.* (and I believe it is true for other Russian films I mentioned) is the fact that there seems to be a gap between the culture of today and the culture of yesterday. Even when the film engages in social commentary, drawing parallels between the two, this assumption is not about one Russian culture evolving from the 1980s to the 2010s, but about a “breaking point” between the past and the present, and this gap could be crossed only in exceptionally dire and violent circumstances, in other words, through the horror story.

It stands to reason that this point, the ground zero, is the break-up of the Soviet Union. It has been consistently argued in scholarship that the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ensuing political and economic crisis became an important marker of loss of national identity and national pride in Russia. Russia became an official political heir to the Soviet Union, and inherited the loss of its status as a world superpower, as well as the loss of its colonial influence over the former republics. It seems that in Russia national emancipation narratives that provided a different perspective on the collapse of the Soviet empire, viewed often as liberation and a fresh start, not the end of history, did not take a strong hold as they did in other republics. First, it was the Soviet Union, then virtually overnight, this country was no more

<sup>11</sup> Mikhail Ryklin, “Hollywood Inside Out. Interview with Anna Al’chik” [Gollivud naiznanku. Interv’iu s Annoi Al’chik]. *Watch as a Symptom* [Dozor kak simptom]. Saint Petersburg: Seans, 2006. 36–49.

and it became Russia, a country with a different name and complicated rather than consistently glorious history. It is beyond the scope of my paper to provide a full analysis of such complex phenomena as Soviet nostalgia and the trauma of loss of the Soviet identity, nor do I suggest that it exists only in Russia. I would like to simply offer a possible interpretation of the breaking point of history that is reflected in the horror story of *S.S.D.*

In the film the mending of the breaking point, the joining of the old and the new is only possible as a horror story, a tale of extreme violence and no redemption (as we remember the protagonists become ruthless killers themselves). Or, in other words, traumatic history creates gaps and abysses that can be bridged only by a horror fantasy of violence and death. It is a very pessimistic scenario, because it precludes a rational public venue of dealing with the breakage of history as trauma. Horror stories, with their demons and maniacs that just fall out of the blue on unsuspecting teenagers (or latently imply some primordial guilt), are about the terrifying circumstances beyond subject's control, emphasizing the sense of fear and loss. While this might reflect the trauma of break-up of the Soviet Union, it does not offer a productive way that would enable change. Encapsulated in a horror story, the gap between then and now will remain an abyss full of monsters.

Finally, the last film for consideration is Ukrainian *The Pit*. A slasher and a survival thriller, the film is also a labyrinth journey. Fairly quickly into the film, the students get stranded in the tunnels, hunted by the maniac and suffering from various other obstacles. The claustrophobic tunnels are shot in green hues, so we see the teenagers endlessly circling around identical passages; their stops differentiate merely by the nature of the danger they are about to face. In the identical tunnels teenagers constantly make mistakes. They find objects that date back to WWII, such as a medical kit or an old can of food and, finally, a machine gun, and manage to misuse them all. It is an interesting reversal of the survival thriller, where found objects usually serve as helping devices. In *The Pit* only the male protagonist, the nerd, out of five characters displays surviving skills. The found medicine kills, canned food poisons, the students mistake their teacher for the killer and shoot him, extinguishing their only hope of getting out of the tunnels. Whether through their own incompetence or the world conspiring against them, teenagers are defined by their lack of understanding of what is going on: they are lost in a labyrinth without any guiding thread.

In the film the spatial metaphor of the labyrinth also defines the notion of time and human cognition, or characters' ability to process and comprehend events around them. The tunnels appear to belong to the WWII era, which is supported by the artefacts they find, at the same time the tunnels house the pagan cult, whose origins go back to pre-Christian era. All these layers of time overlap and coexist in the tunnels, creating a labyrinth of history, which is just as confusing as the eerie



Figure 9. *The Pit Tunnels*

green claustrophobic corridors the students walk in. Time and space create an incomprehensible tangled web around the characters, and, as teenagers try to make sense of what is happening, they are equally lost. Specially familiar objects appear to have dangerous qualities, the warning signs that the killer leaves for the group are allegedly in an ancient Slavic language, and they might as well be in an alien language, as the students have very little success deciphering those signs. Labyrinth presents teenagers with the muffled and disjoint history, which is like a puzzle. This puzzle speaks of concealed or forgotten origins.

The film starts with a stylized cartoon sequence about the pagan origins of Ukrainian people and their later persecution that drove the pagan cult underground. Our teenagers become victims of the serial killer because they are guilty of forgetting their “origins.” They are essentially punished for being clueless, and their ignorance extends not only to mythical pagan history but to ability to read the signs in the old language, or to properly interpret and use the relics of the Soviet era, represented by the war artefacts and the tunnels themselves. By contrast, the killer and the professor, both of whom the students eventually kill, seem to orient themselves very well inside the tunnels. What distinguishes these two adults is not only their age, but the fact that both possess a coherent and cohesive understanding of history: either marginalized history of victimization, represented by the killer, or mainstream accepted history, represented by the professor. The metaphor of the labyrinth, therefore, is not necessarily about which version of history is correct, but about coherency and continuity of the historic narrative. A consistent historical narrative is the way out of the labyrinth, in which nothing makes sense otherwise.

The metaphor of the labyrinth could be applied to Ukrainian history itself, which is a contested ground for re-interpretation, is fragmented and marginalized by the long history of colonization, and is subject to divisive politics of today that split the country into two camps along the axis of East and West, Russian speakers and Ukrainian speakers, pro-Russian and pro-Western, nostalgia for the imperial times and nationalist revival. Perhaps, implicitly addressing these issues, the horror film suggests that in-between lies a vast labyrinth full of perils, where young generation wanders, unable or unwilling to choose between competing historical and political narratives. In absence of the linear or circular vision of history there is a vision of the labyrinth, which is taken over by a horror fantasy of lost origins and an endless perilous journey with no way out.

In conclusion, one must remember that horror cinema is a very new art form within the 21st century popular culture of East Slavic countries. How horror genre will develop, and whether it will ever establish itself as a staple of popular culture, remains to be seen. It is also a subject of another investigation if the dynamics described in this essay are to be found in other popular genres, and if engagement of Hollywood and attention to local history are common elements in other spheres of popular entertainment. Nonetheless, one can conclude that so far the horror genre in Belarus, Russia and Ukraine is predicated on constant reference and reflection of Hollywood horror tropes and the need to validate domestic horror through contextualizing it within Western popular culture. However, it does not mean that horror in Belarus, Russia and Ukraine is merely a derivative unimaginative calque. Recent horror films could also function as a site of difference and appropriation of Hollywood genre formula to make the film “belong” in the country where it is made. Three horror films from Belarus, Russia and Ukraine make the horror story “local” by contemplating and interpreting national history and complex relationship of past and present.

In case of the Belarusian *Masakra* it is a reflection on the nation’s colonial past and totalitarian present; Russian *S.S.D.* addresses the traumatic breaking point of the collapse of the Soviet Union; and *The Pit* from Ukraine could be interpreted through the metaphor of the labyrinth as the site of both the horror story and the fragmented, conflicting visions of Ukrainian history. One need to bear in mind that horror films do not necessarily consciously set out to be symptomatic of the larger cultural condition, but they do represent both cinematic and cultural concerns of their times, reflecting the changing globalized realities of cinema as a medium, and social and political dilemmas their viewers face outside the movie theatre. As such, horror films from Belarus, Russia and Ukraine offer a diverse and productive field for critical interpretation and not just an entertaining way to get very scared by movies.



## **HORROR GENRE IN NATIONAL CINEMAS OF EAST SLAVIC COUNTRIES**

### Summary

The article looks at the past and the present of horror film in post-Soviet countries: Belarus, Russia and Ukraine. It focuses on the recent (2000–onwards) development of horror as a genre of mainstream cinema and what cultural, social and political forces shape its development. The article adapts two venues of exploration: the global or transnational tendencies in horror cinema, namely its reliance on Hollywood genre formulae; and the local perspective, or how the East Slavic horror films position themselves as the site of difference, reflecting their own cultural condition. The article analyzes the post-Soviet horror as a part of newly emerged popular culture, shaped by the globalized cinema market, Hollywood hegemony and local sensibilities of distinct cinematic and pop-culture traditions.