

Postmodern Vampires. Film, Fiction, and Popular Culture

Sorcha Ní Fhlainn – 2019.

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Popular culture criticism is not an easy thing to do. Depending on which schools of thought are trailing us, it may look facile, perhaps trivial, or even as a more or less necessary act of cultural hygiene, but nothing can be further from the truth. Of course, we can be sure that there are such cultural spaces where the study of popular culture still needs to prove its worth, but by and large the tradition pioneered by Ray Browne and his associates at Bowling Green has gone global, to the point that its origin may now even be obscured. It is a tradition that looks at popular culture outside of the “high” and “low” distinctions, and one that brings complexity to its studies by rejecting the idea of a monolithic mass culture, and by granting agency both to popular culture consumers and makers, without dismissing the nebulous movements of cultural discourses running through them. In this tradition, the popular culture critics need to get very close to their object of study, which, given that we are talking about a work carried without hypocrisy outside of “high” and “low” distinctions, can prove to be, although not necessarily, an insurmountable difficulty. In popular culture studies there is a fine line between actual criticism and fandom.

Sorcha Ní Fhlainn’s book, *Postmodern Vampires*, is an excellent example of such popular culture criticism that manages not only to avoid its inherent pitfalls but to actually thrive on them. Citing Ellen Berry in her introductory argument, Sorcha Ní Fhlainn seems to signpost her alignment with the Bowling Green tradition already from the start. Perhaps we can ask then if her account of contemporary vampire fiction in film and literature stands in the genealogy started

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by John Cawelti's *Six-Gun Mystique* (1984) or, like in the case of, say, Marilyn Motz's study of Barbie dolls (Motz 1992), if she manages to unearth larger shifting underlying discourses. The answer would be yes, to both these questions. Sorcha Ní Fhlainn's dive into contemporary vampire fiction is not a first, of course. She cites Nina Auerbach's 1995 study *Our Vampires, Ourselves* as inspiration, but she also distances herself from it by repositioning her interpretations in a larger cultural context. It is exactly this larger cultural context that which gives weight to her study, and also that which makes it a fascinating read.

The difficulty of popular culture criticism does not stem only from the closeness of its object. Inherently, the critics need to work already immersed in the object of their study. Projecting that object in a different geo-cultural space may help (Sorcha Ní Fhlainn comes from Ireland and works out of Manchester Metropolitan University, while her study is mainly concerned with the United States), but given the contemporary permeability of national popular cultures it is not really that different of a situation. However, in order to truly work outside the "high" and "low" distinction, to avoid patronizing popular culture as mass culture, and in order to truly grant agency to those involved in the production and consumption of popular culture, the popular culture critic needs to be aware of another fine line: that between being an actual critic, and being an enlightenment provider. Popular culture studies do not explain away its object, lest it turns into something it did not want to be to begin with.

Elsewhere (Pralea 2012), I was using Michel De Certeau's insights to better reveal this difficulty. Popular culture consumption belongs to our practice of everyday life, and, thus, popular culture studies need to look at the ways in which users (we) operate. To explain away, would mean to draw these practices (which, in De Certeau's terms, are tactics) into strategic fields, and thus we would simply miss the point completely. Instead, popular culture studies need to turn towards a certain kind of narration that would be able to unveil the interplay of strategies and tactics within a given operation. That narration is a setting up of a field upon which the tactics in question can be called to become manifest. Not approaching a reality, but opening up a (discursive) space in which that reality may manifest itself.

Sorcha Ní Fhlainn's *Postmodern Vampires* does exactly this. It is not an all-encompassing study, and she warns us right from the start that she does not want to be exhaustive. She does not set out to provide us with the infinite representation of all things vampire in the last several decades. Instead, she sets up a narrative field in which the ways we tell our vampire stories become manifest.

With a few exceptions, she is concerned with American vampire fiction, and so the way she sets up the field is by taking the various strands of vampire stories in recent history and connect them with the cultural epochs defined by the succeeding American administrations. As with any democracy, administrative politics (if we can allow ourselves this wordplay) are a part of everyday life. Not only that the stream of elected officials reflect the movements and discursive changes in society, but their own mediated discourses shape back the public agenda. Popular culture, so intertwined with everyday life, is obviously not immune to these changes and trends. It becomes then really interesting to take one such popular culture element and draw it through this particular filter, and, perhaps, the more seemingly disconnected it is from the continuously reshaping administrative discourse, the better our choice would be. The only way to decode what these overt politics are shaping in the people that live through them is exactly through this set up narrative field in which the stories will start to tell themselves.

The postmodern vampire is symbolically born (how else?) with a parody, Roman Polanski's 1967 film *Fearless Vampire Killers*, and starts to develop throughout the 70s during Nixon's administration. Sorcha Ní Fhlainn's observations here are pertinent, as we see how, in tune with the social turmoil of the age, the vampire character suffers an ontological shift, suddenly acquiring subjectivity. We are talking, after all, about an American society just transformed by the Civil Rights movement, or still enduring the trauma of the Vietnam War, a society in which marginalized voices have finally started to get louder and louder. Vampires are suddenly starting to speak in this age, they are now confessing, and are being interviewed. With a brilliant twist, Ní Fhlainn projects Nixon's own post-resignation interviews as a vampire-like image (meaning as another set of vampire interviews), two years after Saberhagen's novel *Dracula Tapes*, itself influenced/inspired by Nixon's infamous White House tapes. Vampires in this age multiply beyond Dracula and his mirror images, and also change shape and display new details. Something that perhaps tends to be forgotten is the fact that Nixon's administration changed the American diet on a radical and national level. His agricultural reforms lead to new ways to mass produce food, which in turn make it both cheaper and with less nutritional values. The results of that change are still present to this day, and it is throughout the 1970s that we start seeing the American society obsess over dieting. In another nice twist, we see Nixon's vampires riddled with nutrition problems and obsessing over the quality of their blood diets. By the end of the 1970s the multiple and diverse vampire voices are more and more American and

less and less Old World, and they leave behind their marginality to become quite ubiquitous in the American popular culture.

It is perhaps this ubiquity that leads to a bit of a backlash in the 1980s, this time, under the age of Reaganomics. Sorcha Ní Fhlainn's analyses are on point once again. This time it is not so much what vampires become under Reagan, but rather what happens with vampires' popular culture neighbors. The unstoppable rise of horror slasher fiction that, together with serial killer fictions, seem to smother everything else, may perhaps tell us something about the void left behind by the vampires' 1970s transformations. The talking vampires make room in the 1980s to mute irrational killers, incomprehensible monsters once again. When we do meet vampire fiction, we do indeed meet Reagan vampires: conservative fables about the perils of "immoral" life – single parent families, or queer sexualities. What is interesting in this age is the new idea that vampirism may in fact be reversible: a mere condition, akin to a disease. If there is anything the 1980s vampires reflect more than anything, is probably the AIDS crisis and all its associated social fears and stigmas.

The 1990s as the end of the century decade saw a resurgence of gothic themes and fiction. For Sorcha Ní Fhlainn the 1990s seem to be an age of the gothic double, both a continuation but also a mellowing down of Reagan's 1980s, something that even his successor, George H. W. Bush, announced in his inauguration address. She turns to the success of hybrid horror (*Silence of the Lambs*) in order to explain the sudden Hollywood green-lighting of new vampire products. Thus we have the lavish adaptations *Interview with a Vampire*, or Francis Ford Coppola's *Dracula*. The 1990s vampires reflect the age's public trials (O. J. Simpson, Michael Jackson, Bill Clinton) that exposed these dual personalities, and so we have a continuation of the romantic vampire image yet somehow merged with its shadow monstrous self.

The 2000s vampires are intimately attached to the new paradigm brought about by the 9/11 events. There is also a more or less subtle ontological shift in that they become more and more entwined with science and technology, and less and less with unexplainable mysteries. Sorcha Ní Fhlainn spends a lot of time here analyzing the *Blade* series, with good reason, as its blend of vampire revisionism with its projections of cultural others seems to be, indeed, unique. The vampires of the 2000s have also gone global, their shadowy communities stretching under every nook and cranny of the entire world. As George W. Bush's United States

projects itself outward in search of terrorists, fictions of vampires and their hunters follow through without too much of a second thought.

Perhaps the most interesting decade discussed is that of Barack Obama and Donald Trump. Of course, it may be interesting because we have just come out of it, but this is not the only thing. On the one hand we seem to be dealing with a return to origins, to the postmodern origins to be precise, of vampire fictions: the rebooted vampire subject. On the other hand, the decade is simply dominated by two huge fiction spaces existing in almost perfect opposition to each other: *Twilight* and *True Blood*. One is conservative and chaste, aimed at teenage audiences, the other is progressive and sexually liberated, aimed at adult audiences. However, beyond the intended audiences of these two sagas, they gather around them images and values, again, almost in perfect opposition. This, together with the two presidencies that could not be more different than each other, speaks volumes about the deeply polarized state of the American society and culture today.

Sorcha Ní Fhlainn ends the book with a short piece of Donald Trump's presidency that seemingly managed to chase away the vampire fiction from popular culture, which is another very interesting observation all together. Trump's presidency is itself a deeply postmodern act, although, surprisingly or not (depending on where one looks for signs), it comes from a twisted version of postmodernism, one that stems from the postmodern right identified by Michelle Goldberg already in 2006. No longer religious though, we see how out of Trump's relativism stems a new fundamentalism. It is the uniqueness of this new fundamentalism, with its gaslighting effect, believes Sorcha Ní Fhlainn, the one that chases the vampires away, rendering them mute due to "shock and awe." She remains hopeful though, that in the years to come, we will see new instances of vampire fiction, telling new stories about our new future selves.

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