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A Map for Reading Trauma and Fear in the American Literary and Cultural Tradition

Lukić, Marko. Geography of Horror: Spaces, Hauntings and the American Imagination. Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. pp. 203.

Since the very first appearance of eighteenth-century Gothic tales, horror narratives have had a lot to say about space, that is, of how human protagonists interact with their surroundings, and how the environment reflects and affects their feelings, anxieties and preoccupations. This seemingly unusual but rather strong connection was in the early days transposed onto the American continent, where it went on to become one of the red threads of literary and cultural imagination, transcending a single horror narrative and recurring in a series of them, evolving as the genre evolved through changing social and historical circumstances. However, not many larger-scope academic publications have appropriately addressed this intricate aspect of the American cultural imagination. This is precisely what Marko Lukić's Geography of Horror: Spaces, Hauntings and the American Imagination offers: a reconsideration of the history of American fiction through the prism of the genre and with firm theoretical rootedness in human geography.

One of the latest editions of Palgrave Macmillan, in its Palgrave Gothic series, Geography of Horror presents six chapters of the map which the readers might find useful for navigating the rather vast territory of American horror fiction. The first two chapters in a map-legend fashion provide some orientation advice, introducing the context of the American romantic period, in which the fascination with space and the experience of fear in its different aspects and degrees were both born. These chapters also signpost the path through the theoretical framework, referencing and explaining the corpus Lukić relies on in his research – and dissects, as it turns out in the following chapters – which includes works by Gaston Bachelard, Yi-Fu Tuan, Michel Foucault, Edward Soja,

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David Harvey, Robert Tally, and Tim Creswell, among others. In their analysis of a number of literary texts and movies, the following four chapters move between the nineteenth century and the present day, thus decisively stressing the enduring significance of particular spaces and places for horror narratives and their role in the American cultural imagination. The first pin on the map is "The Frontier," an inexhaustible source of anxiety for the settlers and inspiration for the authors. Through the theoretically elaborated concept of the frontier, this chapter offers substantial analyses of narratives by Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Charles Brockden Brown, which are placed side by side with contemporary achievements by Wes Craven, Antonia Bird, Robert Eggers, and other authors.

As the wilderness of the frontier grows by human effort into a space one might tentatively call home, so the archetypal image of the frontier gives way to that of the house. The chapter titled "Domestic Horrors" strengthens the connection between the two loci referencing works by Hawthorne and Brown again, but also moves beyond including E. A. Poe and H. P. Lovecraft in the analysis. The chapter additionally offers an insightful theoretical contribution to the existing debates within human geography, comparing and contrasting ideas expounded by Bachelard and Harvey, and claiming that the house serves as a particularly prolific trope in horror narratives due to its situatedness between two different theoretical paradigms: Bachelard's romanticized one and Harvey's economic, whereby "monetary, physical or emotional, the loss of investments causes the house to slip and regress into something akin to … Bachelardian spatial alveoli." (Lukić 97) This chapter expands on the (haunted) house imagery by exploring narratives set among clusters of houses – suburbia as a prototypical projection of the American dream, which easily becomes the American nightmare if observed from the theoretical framework proposed by Lukić. To this effect, "Domestic Horrors" also presents analyses of texts such as The Shining, The Amityville Horror, A Nightmare on Elm Street or Halloween, positioning them in the context of other social issues – apart from the economic ones – such as, among others, gender or racial exclusivity. As each texts is positioned differently, they add shades of meaning to the initially presented map, showing its persevering stability in the ability to adapt to changing socio-historical and cultural circumstances.

The map then leads the reader toward the American small town, as (re-)invented by H. P. Lovecraft and Stephen King. The chapter titled "Small Town Heterotopias" deals with the

heterotopian duality inherent in the spatiality and reality of small towns scattered throughout America and its fiction. In numerous examples from Lovecraft's and King's fiction, this particular space manifests the parallel existence of two levels, one "normal" and the other monstrous, the latter serving as the bearer of the potential for subversion that the horror genre inevitably contains. "Small Town Heterotopias" find their logical continuation in "Urban Nightmares," the chapter which questions the sources and effects of horror in the wilderness of city streets. From Walter Benjamin's and Charles Baudelaire's descriptions of the flâneur and the corresponding analysis of E. A. Poe's stories, the discussion moves toward a more contemporary take on the city as Soja's 'postmetropolis' and theoretical considerations of power and hegemony by Michel Foucault and Antonio Gramsci. From this starting point, the chapter approaches contemporary narratives by authors such as Ryûhei Kitamura, George Romero, or Alex Proyas.

It is evident that Lukić's book abounds in a variety of texts from different periods and in different media, which are nevertheless analyzed and discussed in a coherent method with a sound and unified theoretical background. While getting lost in hidden alleys, underground or sewer system, basements of deserted houses or the unexplored depths of the frontier might appear all too easy, Geography of Horror offers directions and shortcuts which only a true connoisseur can know. Readers with academic interests as well as those simply allured by the genre or infatuated with popular culture will find themselves guided through the labyrinth of American horror, with one path leading to another and each giving detailed answers to numerous questions this book deals with.

Works Cited

Lukić, Marko. Geography of Horror: Spaces, Hauntings and the American Imagination. Palgrave Macmillan, 2022.

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