

Postcolonial horror – monsters and meaning at the margins

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Perceptions of horror as a genre both in literature and on screen have historically been linked to different ways of thinking about monsters and the monstrous, and these perceptions, in turn have highlighted the more or less critical role that horror tropes play in debates over cultural acceptability, social injustice and the use of the uncanny to signal fractures in the current or previous social order. Scholars of cinematic horror from Robin Wood and Tanya Modleski to James Donald and Bridgit Cherry have variously described the role of monsters as vehicles through which to confront traumas arising from the behaviour of the bourgeoisie under capitalism, industrialisation, patriarchy and misogyny, racism, the hegemony of scientific rationalism, war, and the growing ubiquity of communication and surveillance technologies. There are disagreements amongst horror scholars about whether catharsis or reconciliation or merely further titillation and exploitation are the net result of representations within the genre.

Horror monsters in the guise of serial killers, viruses, zombies, vampires, werewolves, ghosts, cell phones and so on have respectively been theorised as emerging from the tattered edges of enlightenment rationalist thinking by pushing us to visualise fears that we ignore or repress: Those whom we have despised and exploited will in turn take revenge. Drugs and technologies that enable us to be good neoliberal subjects will destroy our wills, social bonds and sanity. Our acquiescence to nuclear weapons and the exploitation of the environment will breed beings that annihilate humanity. Of course, the 'we' in each case varies: for male viewers identified with traditional power, the monsters/zombies are the working classes, rising up against their erstwhile oppressors and children, queer, or female, those whose bodies are the origins of vulnerability, desire, menstrual blood and human life. For others, monsters embody capitalist destruction and viciousness; or violent masculine pride which destroys not only women and children but also the chance of equity and wellbeing. If war films, superhero movies and romantic comedies invite audiences to reconcile the contradictions of patriarchal capitalism and the military industrial complex through seductive participation in a fantasy of nuclear families, victory and normality, horror relentlessly punctures these facile dreams (while also, along the way, exploiting the visual power of physical or psychological sadism for a media industry that runs on profit)!

As a prelude to thinking about postcolonial horror films in countries such as India and Brazil, we need to consider that horror both benefits from and can be subversive to the current neoliberal and neo-colonial order. From the work of Rick Altman, let us take the idea that genres are not simply 'platonic categories, existing outside the flow of time' but rather, that genres in popular culture fulfil, at least partially, an ideological role. They 'accommodate' the economically and religiously shaped 'desires' of groups of people to the priorities of capitalist accumulation, patriarchy and nationalist elites whilst also indicating to cultural elites the narratives that will have most purchase and influence in hegemonic control. Let us add to this two other classic theorisations of the monstrous in horror. First, Fredric Jameson's warning that '[e]vil... continues to characterize whatever is radically different from me ... the stranger from another tribe, the 'barbarian' who speaks another language and follows outlandish traditions, but also the woman, whose biological difference stimulates fantasies of castration and devoration ... the alien being... behind whose apparently human features a malignant and preternatural intelligence is thought to lurk...' And second, Julia Kristeva's invocation of the ambiguity of abjection as being at the heart of what is horrifying about monsters in horror: '[a]bjection is that which "does not respect borders, positions, rules", that which reveals "the fragility of the law"; it is the place "where meaning collapses"'. So, in leaving us uncertain about where self ends and other begins, in revealing to us our own fears, desires and transgressions or the full extent of our oppression

by social actors and systems, and in identifying what we find irrational/unacceptable and therefore wish to deny or destroy, horror monsters gain their metaphorical power, and play their (potentially) subversive role.

Two contemporary horror films that play on many of the tropes identified above are *Bacurau* (Filho and Dornelles, Brazil, 2019) and *Karnan* (Selvaraj, India, 2021). All sitting at the intersection of horror and magical realism, their plots reference religious, racist and casteist violence and counter-struggle, surveillance, neoliberalism and misogyny. Mainly horror, *Bacurau*, does some genre-bending as it introduces tropes from classic westerns only to unsettle and ultimately overthrow them. Set at the very margins of an already-peripheral (unmapped) rural area (*sertão*) in the far north-east of Brazil, the story dramatizes a deadly battle between classes, between races and between indigenous and foreign groups, while exploring love and ancestry, myth and forgiveness through its multiple subplots. Teresa travels back to Bacurau for the funeral of her grandmother Carmelita only to find herself in the middle of an unfolding massacre as the already-isolated village has its water cut off, and then its electricity and then its entire internet and communication system, ostensibly by bureaucrats who resent the ‘uppity’ villagers, but as ultimately shown, by a sinister combination of local landowners and violent white vigilante tourists from Europe and the USA.

Dreams, shamans, psychedelic substances and bandits or outlaws are invoked in the pathway to understanding what is going on and to solidifying the resistance of the village and their subaltern solidarity in the face of impending genocide. Political complexity is added by an ostensible comprador class represented by the local mayor who has aided in isolating the indigenous people of the village while pretending to represent them. As the film progresses the monstrous solidifies. The inchoate horror of unknown perpetrators of mob-style assassination and water-theft or of bizarre magical rituals and murderous sigils, is stripped away leaving close-ups of the rictus grins of a white lynch-mob as they hunt and murder local indigenous families. Part allegory and part social commentary on vicious supremacism of Bolsonaro’s Brazil, *Bacurau* exemplifies multiple aspects of the potentially subversive role of horror in societies where the colonial legacy is still very much alive.

In stunning alignment with Filho and Dornelles’ film, yet made in a totally different cultural tradition, Mari Selvaraj’s depiction of the struggle of Dalits in Podiyankulam village against the authoritarian regional upper-caste Tamil bureaucracy, corrupt police and sadistic landowners in *Karnan* invokes multiple magic-realist tropes. Visually these encircle the narrative from the earliest ghost/horror sequences in which a little dead Dalit girl appears amongst the living to fuel her brother’s rage and pain to the montages in which time slows down or speeds up as the protesting villagers are tortured and disappeared. Both metaphor and mundane rationale, like water and surveillance drones in *Bacurau*, the absence of a bus-stop at Karnan’s village is the premise that provokes the film’s caste and class conflict. Ironically, perhaps, following Tamil cinema’s classic heroic action and repeated return to mythological characters, Karnan with his multiple (god-like) feats of valour and very human frustration with authority demands that his fellow villagers stop their endurance and silent complicity with the vicious regime of India’s upper castes. His call is heeded and a stone thrown at a bus which refuses to stop even for those desperately in need. That one act catalyses the brutal violence and suppression – including torture and abuse – which engulfs the film’s dénouement.

Both *Bacurau* and *Karnan* could easily become classic horror films, despite their cross-generic and intertextual cinematography, illustrating even more keenly Altman’s points about the ways in which genres must be understood in their contexts of production and consumption, and historicised as political/ideological objects. The sense of the uncanny, of strangeness and horror

in both films is enhanced by their respective musical scores which introduce indigenous dance, instruments and songs at moments of tension and defiance. Likewise, both films repeatedly invoke the double burden that women within these subaltern and marginalised communities have to bear – between the threat of sexual violence from antagonists, suppression by their own kinfolk and the racism of the state. In *Bacurau* women come into their own as protagonists through violent resistance. All of this, of course, begs for an audience analysis to elicit from those with opposing points of view the aspects of the films they find most horrifying. Unquestionably *Bacurau's* attack on white supremacist imperialism and capitalism and *Karnan's* battle against caste-Hindu supremacism, police brutality and dispossession might both be said to strike at the self-concept of those audiences identified with and belonging to oppressive groups and practices. It casts them as monsters, their actions as monstrous. It invites them to watch as they are defied by those they abhor. Perhaps despite being humanised, or even because they are humanised, the othered groups in these films appear abject to their oppressors, impossibly terrifying and unsettling. Like Jordan Peele's *Get Out*, both films contribute to an anti-elitist tradition of activist counter-cultural production within despised genres which operate at the margins of non-Western cinemas. Whether they spark changes in the ideological imaginaries of their respective local and international audiences remains to be studied.

References

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