


MEMORIES OF THE NIGHT: MODERN FEARS IN THE SHADOW OF THE UNKNOWN

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to discuss the fears of modern pre-industrial society in the West, and to understand how its horror stories and symbolic figures have echoed in contemporary times, fostering prejudices, but also raising awareness of differences in recent times. It is justified by the possibility of promoting reflections on the popular imagination, between different temporalities and societies, debating the way in which they deal with the unknown. Qualitative, descriptive and transversal in nature, it is a documentary analysis based on bibliographical, filmic and literary research. He analyzed how the modern notion of fear still impacts contemporaneity and how it is being portrayed by popular culture in the twenty-first century, emphasizing the importance of a critical look at fear and the structures that surround it as a way to break down prejudices and build bridges.

Keywords: Humanization of Fear; Modern Age; Modern Horror; Pop Culture.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Man's strongest and oldest emotion is the
fear, and the strongest and oldest kind of fear
It is the fear of the unknown. (LOVECRAFT, 1987,
p. 11).

The above quote is an emblematic thesis of the American novelist Howard Phillips Lovecraft, responsible for horror tales centered on human frailty in the face of a hostile and often indifferent universe. He came to compose the basic "pantheon" of Western horror writers, from Edgar Allan Poe and Mary Shelley to Stephen King and Clive Barker. However, the writing of the macabre and haunted is not an unprecedented trend, but rather a continuation of human beliefs and myths over time, which use a common emotion: fear.

Fear is, according to biopsychosocial theories⁴, an involuntary response to situations of apparent risk, which are often the result of the unknown. Multiple animals use natural mechanisms to ensure their safety, such as a roar or the temporary adoption of an elongated or bipedal posture — to give the impression of greater height. Humans gradually learned to fear, but also to master such mechanisms. From the first lightning strike, to the flames spread by it, humans react to the different with amazement and curiosity.

Throughout history, human societies have interacted—and still interact—with the inhabited environment in a variety of ways, from gathering and hunting to cultivation and expansion. This is also driven by beliefs and values related to each group and individual, something that tends to acquire a metaphysical and mystical bias. The practice of magic and the gradual establishment of religions paved the way for the idea of spirits, incantations, and other phenomena now posed as supernatural. Faith in the spiritual would help to explain what was unknown and fearful in the world, thus contributing to a more existentially ordered life (TUAN, 2005).

In the period commonly referred to as the Modern Age, he personified himself in the figures most insurmountable to men before the Age of Enlightenment, the "children of the night" and "heirs of death". Ghosts, vampires, demons, witches, and werewolves, roaming cemeteries and haunted houses to torment the innocent. But that past still wanders in popular belief and imagination, whispers echoed by centuries of nightly narratives.

While in Japanese beliefs cats are seen as beings with access to the mystical world and who bring luck, but in Western countries, black cats are still associated with bad luck and especially witches. In fact, the popular imagination has long preserved the image of the old

⁴ For more details, see the works of Baptista, Carvalho and Lory (2005); Tuan (2005); Pauluk and Ballão (2019).

and decrepit witch providing dubious help, as presented in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (2001). Ghosts as damned souls and vampires, the guide of damnation gradually taking on shades of carnal sin (lasciviousness). Old mansions as the scene of the torment of unsuspecting residents and the shadows of the night are one step away from revealing a demon. However, the last decades have established changes in the perspective of stories that caused terror in the Modern Age, the same fears are rooted in Western culture, gradually gaining new clothes to adapt to the present times.

Therefore, this article is a qualitative, descriptive and cross-sectional research, being a case study based on bibliographic and documentary research (filmic and literary) on horror and suspense works of Western pop culture and historical sources of the modern period – involving theoretical references previously analyzed and published from 24 works between articles, books and movies. It aims to analyze representations of the figures that terrorized the popular imagination in the Modern Age, drawing parallels with representations of them in contemporary times – to understand their evolution in the collective unconscious through pop culture. The research was carried out with the authors' personal collection, in addition to the Google Scholar and SciELO platforms, using the following descriptors: Humanization of Fear; Modern Age; Modern Horror; Pop Culture; Popular imagination.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A sea equally unknown to us today as the ocean in the Modern Age, the human mind passes through dark paths, the first creature of the night and heir to the most obscure fears; but also to the garments of "monstrosity". Inconceivable by rationality by the simple and forced act of keeping them alien to human otherness itself. Denying such dark corners of the imagination that took shape in creatures of the night and nightmares.

Wolves sleep into the night
Bats fly out in the open
A lost soul that never sleeps
Afraid of witches and fatal shadows

The excerpt from the Brazilian version of the song "*Lullaby Of Woe*" (2015), theme of the game *The Witcher III*, illustrates in a poetic way the fears of pre-industrial Europe. Before electricity allowed the appropriation of shadows, the night was the stage for tasks and shady people, fertile ground for dark events, soon attributed to the supernatural. Although in the Modern Age, natural and supernatural had grayer barriers than today, belief and uncertainty complemented each other to support creatures and stories of morbid vivacity to this day.

2.1 NIGHT PRELUDES

Among the most diverse human beliefs in time, it is not uncommon to come across dualistic perspectives on life — while much of existence is divided between good/just/right and evil/unjust/incorrect. From Egyptian and Greek polytheism to Christian and Islamic monotheism, figures associated with both "positive" and "negative" aspects of life are present — often permeating an antagonistic relationship between benevolent deities and evil entities. A basic and well-known example in contemporary popular culture is angels and demons.

Each era and culture has taught humanity new fears, but among its ruptures and permanences, the persistent fear of monsters is remarkable. Tuan (2005, p. 46-47) explains that humanity tends to blame mythical creatures for what is bad and wrong in their lives — also aiming to better understand the unknown. Again, one of the objectives of this is to offer meaning to existence and its phenomena, as summarized by the author:

Nature is energetic and unpredictable. One way to understand nature is to see it as full of evil spirits that need to be calmed. Almost without exception, spirits haunt the world of villagers, and this is true whether villagers practice shifting cultivation or a more stable form of traditional agriculture. The origin of spirits can be human or non-human; The villagers don't bother to make precise distinctions. Generally speaking, human spirits surround the village and tend to be benevolent, or at least harmless, although this is not always the case. The deities of nature dominate the surrounding forest. The villagers are afraid of the forest, of which they know little.

Before the Harry Potter literary saga (1998-2007), in which wizards fly on broomsticks and dine with werewolves and ghosts, there was a genuine fear that surrounded the so-called "creatures of the night". Night and darkness were the realms of demons and other dangers, but in truth, the light of understanding was denied also to owls, cats, and women. Any events and creatures that men could not explain or contain.

2.2 DANCING WITH ECHOES

"A young man wandering in the moonlit night recites passionate vows in the woods, rehearsing his engagement. As soon as he has finished his words, the branches twist and move, revealing the bone hand of a dead young woman who starts to chase him to seal the marriage." A narrative told in small mouth in the fairs of the early Modern Age? In fact, it is the first act of the film *Corpse Bride* (2005), by Tim Burton. It is important to point out that, in the Modern Age, the belief in the double (non-divorce of body and soul after death, which remained in a state of half-life) was almost hegemonic to the point that corpses were dug up to receive a judicial sentence or even indicate their murderers in a practice known as cruentation (DELUMEAU, 2009).

The prospect of the dead rising from the tombs was a palpable fear throughout Europe and inspired creatures in the popular imagination, as well as, later, stories such as that of *Giselle* (1840), a tragic ballet marked by the presence of *the willis*, spectres of dead maidens and present in the folklore of northeastern Europe. To prevent the deceased from being inclined to settle pending matters among the living, a cross was erected at the site of a tragic death in order to prevent the spirit from being tormented, wandering unaware of its death. Masses were held and prayers were dedicated to appease their souls – which were not cut off from the body at all (DELUMEAU, 2009).

This practice still endures, a solid tradition in Catholicism, with the intention of ensuring that the soul finds peace, but it can also be seen as an echo of belief in ghosts. Even today, people seem unwilling to socialize with the spirits of the dead and fear of their walk founded an entire genre of horror in pop culture, zombies. According to Kronzek and Kronzek (2003, p. 301): "Whatever the method, the attempt to create a zombie is seen as a perverse act [...]. Under Haiti's current laws, the creation of zombies is considered murder, subjecting the offender to the same penalties as any other type of homicide."

A work very present in pop culture is George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996-present), which inspired the television series *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019) and narrates dead people walking in the winter night to personify evil incarnate. Although the TV adaptation has personified the evil that distorts nature and appropriates death to make it more recognizable to the public, the literary saga, so far, has not faced worldly fear, being called in the books only "the Others", in a tone more terrifying and impactful than "mere" zombies. They are something else, who pursue all that is alive and warm and come bringing the long cold night of death. So both in the saga and in the primary world, the misunderstanding of the nature of these beings instigates an unconscious part that fears the unknown that dwells in the shadows.

But personifying the fears of death and night was not a trend created by Martin. According to Kronzek and Kronzek (2003) the term *zombie* is of Haitian origin, but the concept of a wandering corpse is much older. Throughout pre-industrial Europe, reports of the dead attacking the living were a cultural trait, and each region adapted its own legends. In Romania there were *the strigoi*, *strigon* in Istria, *vampir* in the Balkans, *opyr* in Carpathians; it didn't matter, they were dead people who wandered at night in search of blood and collected themselves in coffins during the day (LECOUTEUX, 2005). A common belief at the time was that a stake driven through the heart could keep them tied to the earth, or the use of the ever-efficient method of decapitation.

Delumeau (2009) points out that these beings played an expiatory role in European

communities as "broad-backed" carrying the blame for events outside the natural understanding of the time. But there was no reason for such creatures to be afraid of death if they were already dead. However, little by little, the bloodthirsty creature of violent character gained more well-defined and refined traits, until it took on the aristocratic and erudite version in the book *Dracula* (1897), which served as the basis for the current imaginary about vampires.

A modern relative and sworn enemy of vampires in pop culture, werewolves evoked the bestial and primitive side of man who saw himself as a model of evolution. In this way, as represented in the Harry Potter saga (1998-2007), the werewolf caused horror and distrust in the rational man, with his physical traits and instincts close to or entirely those of a wolf or wild animal. According to Baigent and Leigh (2001) and Lecouteux (2005), during the Inquisition, men were tortured under the accusation of lycanthropy achieved through a pact with the Devil, even going so far as to relate werewolves in Slavic countries as the "living" form of vampires.

Romania also had its own particular species of werewolf, the *vârkolac*, deceased people who transformed themselves into monsters to attack old enmities and unfortunates, but their nature was not very different from that attributed to vampires themselves (LECOUTEUX, 2005). Many credited his circumstances of awakening in death as punishment, punishment for sins and cruelties committed in life. Little can be more frightening than consequences, and although in contemporary times many believe in a more robust division between life and death, physical and metaphysical — when one believes in it — how can one not fear what rationality does not understand?

Modern horror may have been born in the past, but it certainly didn't die there. Old houses that creaked on cold nights, said to be the abodes of spirits tormented by their lives and deaths; It may seem like an archaic scenario, but the State of New York, USA, obliges, by law, real estate agents to inform buyers if the property in question is haunted. This can even be included in the property deed (ROSSINI, 2019). Works like *The Haunting of Hill House* (2018), a Netflix series based on Shirley Jackson's novel, are able to induce genuine fears by bringing familiar and common parallels to our imagination in a palpable way to the viewer. Perhaps, in the same way that before the great navigations, they portrayed monsters in the wild ocean (ALVES, 2013), death has always been unfathomable waters in its fullness and the first human instinct is to prepare for danger.

Going back to *A Song of Ice and Fire* (MARTIN, 2012), the Others are creatures associated with everything that is cold and deadly, unnameable; with its eternal rival representing light, fire, and life. Although in the general plan of the work he criticizes the

dichotomy for the subjective character that crosses beliefs, always making them interpretative ashes, as in the primary world, those immersed in it have greater difficulty in capturing its nuances. But this fear and polarization are not just in fiction.

A particularity of American haunted houses, which corroborates the fear having its source in the unknown, are the constructions on indigenous cemeteries, haunted by beings portrayed as evil, as in Stephen King's *The Shining* (1987). The tendency is repeated in many real and fictional stories, to attribute evil and danger to religions and non-Christian figures. "Black magic", for example, carries the belief that it cannot be practiced during the day and is widely associated — in an erroneous and prejudiced way — with the ritualistic practices of voodoo (KRONZEK; KRONZEK, 2003).

2.3 FEAR, PRIDE, AND PREJUDICE

At the Salem Witch Trials (1692-1693) one of the first women accused was Tituba, a slave of debated ethnicity, but certainly not white. Even though pop culture has changed the image of witches from: threatening the natural order to associate them with figures, especially women, who challenge socially accepted conventions such as patriarchy. Thus, elements of counterculture. However, this movement of critical discovery in pop culture has not extended to demystify the cultures of non-hegemonic groups. Even today the stigma directed at voodoo is undeniable, in the USA and Brazil religions of African origins are still the most vandalized and victims of religious intolerance as Portela *et al point out*.(2021).

It is common to hear adherents of other faiths pejoratively refer to the practitioners of Umbanda and Candomblé as "macumbeiros" or "macumba makers". The definition of the word "macumba" has different meanings, including the association with a percussion instrument, of African origin, with the same name, used in terreiros of Afro-Brazilian cults (PORTELA et al., 2021, p. 21).

The weight of this stigma in the popular imagination is so great that in Brazil, in 1992, the "Evandro Case", as the case of the disappearance and death of the six-year-old boy became known, gained notoriety in the media by having among the accused, two women related to the mayor of the city of Guaratuba — where the crime took place — and frequenters of an Afro-Brazilian cult terreiro, being accused of ritual crime. The investigation concluded that they were mentors, and together with a pai de santo and other men, they would have "practiced black magic" and "sacrificed the child". The investigation was sensationalized by the media as the "Witches of Guaratuba" case, and the lynching of the accused was requested by the public, while confessions were obtained through torture, as a new journalistic investigation later showed the biased nature of the judicial investigation. But also revealing the power that information has in the construction and influence of the imaginary of the social (VELOSO; SOUZA, 2021).

With the release of the unedited tape of the confession obtained through torture of the accused and the proof of the violation of their human rights during the first investigation, they were absorbed in 2018, after more than two decades of imprisonment. But the provocation remains: Why was a crime — still unsolved today — so easily associated by the Brazilian population with ritualistic practices of non-Christian beliefs?

It is not an unprecedented feat, in fact. Telfer (2019) finds that the rotting body of Elizabeth's husband "bled" after her touch. Which for the jury of the time was enough to prove his authorship of the crime, with his disinterest in religion serving as an omen of his evil acts and practice of witchcraft. Elizabeth is even portrayed, in the few surviving sources today, in the familiar archetype of the wicked and disguised witch, as pointed out: "And, despite having lived in the seventeenth century [...] she is surprisingly recognizable, a familiar spirit, and everything else" (TELFER, 2019, p. 82). Regardless of the veracity of her guilt, it is curious to note how easy it was to believe her as guilty, relocating her to a less human and more "distorted" and "corrupted" category, that of witch.

So, even though the representation of witches in the contemporary imagination has changed compared to the Modern Age — with the Harry Potter literary saga having a significant merit in positively popularizing the practice of magic and witchcraft — accusations of witchcraft in real life are still made in a pejorative way, to criminalize and defame. "In this sense, prejudice is configured as an unfavorable opinion, which is not based on objective data, based solely on a hostile feeling." (PORTELA *et al.*, 2021, p. 20).

Such facts allude to the complexity of the social structures in which we are inserted and how their roots can hurt and strangle divergent ones, and it is by no means an easy task to see them with a critical eye or even to modify them. This task would take at least a fraction of the time of its existence and many joint actions and thoughts that do not extinguish, but cast on these concepts and structures the perspective of its time.

And with the explanation for what is "good" and just in the world, there is also the explanation for what is "evil" and unjust. Humanity in general does not seem to support the notion that they are responsible for their actions, so they charge angels and demons for their actions. In the light of Terry Pratchett (2008), we need the "little lies", such as Santa Claus, ghosts and zombies, to believe the "big lies", such as justice, rights and duties.

Continuing with the filmic cases, *The Witch* (2015) reveals that sometimes "darkness" wins, and not even faith and order, however long associated with light, are incorruptible. The plot exposes the conflicts of a highly religious English family during the occupation of the 13 North American colonies. Suffering from crop and livestock pests, the family also appears to be stalked by a witch residing in the surrounding forest. In a scenario bordering on misery, the patriarch and matriarch try to find meaning in their challenges, even if they need to blame

a perverse and almost invisible figure.

Gradually, the family members conspire among themselves, accusing each other of witchcraft, and eventually destroying each other. The way in which the script is presented may lead the audience to question whether there was even an antagonistic witch in this context, or whether the family's beliefs — along with their paranoia away from any other social contacts — accentuated the frustration generated by the fruitless work in the field. Again, the analysis of a work like this can help to reflect on the popular imaginary, sometimes of the colonial past, sometimes of the contemporary present — which includes, of course, the subjective interpretation of a film team regarding the imaginary of the time.

As expressed in Delumeau's text (2009) and easily understood, the shadows feared in the Modern Age and eagerly denied by contemporaneity, which, shedding light at night to compensate for their absence in the skies — the truth is that, darkness offers freedom. Night, eternal accomplice of what cannot be seen. And especially, the stories that don't want to be told.

Understanding the unknown as a source of learning and margin of discovery, the present work is based on the analysis of the representations of the figures that terrorized the popular imagination in the Modern Age, drawing a parallel with the representations of them in contemporary times to understand their evolution in the collective unconscious. This is a concept devised by Carl Jung et al. (2016), which refers to a deeper and more shared layer of the human psyche, containing fundamental symbols passed down from generation to generation – giving rise to folk myths and legends, for example.

Starting from the premise that such dark creatures were interpreted as terrifying because they were associated with what men of the time had no control and knowledge of, it was considered that just as in the Modern Age, horror is imprinted on the psychological through the misunderstood and inexplicable. Between the ruptures and permanences of history, monster narratives persist in people's collective unconscious.

3 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

If for a long time this fear linked to the supernatural was marked in modern history and echoed in tales of night terrors, with characters who are the embodiment of human fears; Cinema and literature have narrated these same stories in different ways, wondering what the perspective and roots of these beings are. Witches, werewolves and vampires have become the protagonists in recent decades, heroes such as DC Comics' Batman and Marvel's Scarlet Witch seem to appropriate fear, darkness and the unknown to narrate new perspectives. A trend that can be considered humanizing towards the creatures of the night, perhaps because the present day does not recognize dichotomous scenarios and has been

inhabiting the gray contours. Even the ghosts that haunt old mansions may not be as dangerous as the living ones that led them to their graves, as Del Toro's film *The Scarlet Hill* (2015) shows in shades of macabre poetry.

It is not without merit to associate fear, in part, with ignorance, and some of the nocturnal stories have been told to such an extent that their characters have become familiar. In this framework, terror is still genuine when its source remains unexplained, unexplored and unspeakable, as it was in the past, when those who did not see it were forced to believe what they were told. *The Tale of the Three Brothers* (ROWLING, 2008) presents different ways of dealing with fear and how it is important for survival and growth in a time full of dangers, but without neglecting to emphasize the wisdom in respecting it, in order to make the figure who personifies fear an old acquaintance. Perhaps questioning and embracing the unknown is a way to avoid many terrifying stories, especially non-fictional ones, also renegade to the shadows.

In conclusion, it is expected that this work will reflect on fear, and how it manifests itself in people's imagination throughout history. Its realization is based on interdisciplinary dialogues, between history itself, psychology and anthropology, in addition to the multiple artistic media in which representations of terror are made. With the discussions made here, it is also intended to open paths for subsequent and thematically related works.

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