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A R T Y K U Ł Y I R O Z P R A W Y

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PATCHWORK GOTHIC IN POLISH VAMPIRE FILMS

VAMPIRE GOTHIC

Gothic fiction, alternatively dubbed Gothic horror, dates back to 18th--century England. Horace Walpole's 1764 novel *The Castle of Otranto* is considered the beginning of the new literary trend, followed by numerous acclaimed Gothic classics such as Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), Matthew Gregory Lewis' *The Monk* (1796), Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818), John Polidori's *The Vampyre* (1819), Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), and many others. According to Jerry A. Clery, and regardless of the fact that Walpole subtitled the second edition of *Otranto* "A Gothic Story", it was not until the 20th century that the term "Gothic novel" became established (Clery 2002: 21), once the stylistics and thematic scope were already firmly ingrained.

At the core of Gothic we find a fascination with fear, horror, terror, supernatural forces, and unexplained and uncanny phenomena. Hence, the themes of obsession, madness, curses, revenge from beyond the grave and un-dead characters (vampires, zombies, demons) returning to

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Earth are some of the recurring Gothic motifs (Snodgrass 2005: 152–154). The setting of Gothic stories is another vital genre constituent. In the introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, Jerrold Hogle paints a detailed picture of the Gothic landscape with the following words: "A Gothic tale usually takes place (at least some of the time) in an antiquated or seemingly antiquated space — be it a castle, a foreign palace, an abbey, a vast prison, a subterranean crypt, a graveyard, a primeval frontier or island, a large old house or theatre, an aging city or urban underworld, a decaying storehouse, factory, laboratory, public building, or some new recreation of an older venue, such as an office with old filing cabinets, an overworked spaceship, or a computer memory. Within this space, or a combination of such spaces, are hidden some secrets from the past (sometimes the recent past) that haunt the characters, psychologically, physically, or otherwise at the main time of the story" (Hogle 2002: 2). Accompanying the Gothic space paradigm is the Gothic protagonist. Maria Janion describes this archetype as follows: "The Gothic novel developed its own type of hero, known as the Gothic villain. This character is a grim brute and tyrant, a passionate 'great criminal,' immoralist, and blasphemer. He is often endowed with the ambiguous beauty of evil [...], frequently succumbs to madness, and sometimes suffers from a split personality" (Janion 2002: 105).

Conspicuously, Gothic spaces aim to reflect the emotional and mental states of the protagonists. The madness, distress, obsession and despair of the characters seem to naturally reverberate within the old, antiquated Gothic walls and ruins. As Clery points out, the Gothic revival in architecture coincided with the birth of the literary genre (Clery 2002: 21), resulting in the two becoming permanently linked, as well as providing the name for the latter.

Perhaps the tremendous success of the Gothic genre can be partially attributed to its eclectic nature. According to Chloe Buckley, "from its beginning, Gothic has been something of a patchwork. Hybrid in terms of genre, the first Gothic tales stitched together medieval and historical romance, with the novel of manners, and supernatural and sensationalist tales from chapbooks and ballad sheets. Eighteenth-century Gothic was a new literary vogue, but it was also something reconstituted, a repetition of past forms and stories" (Buckley 2013).

Horace Walpole successfully used it in his *Otranto* novel. Much as his Strawberry Hills villa in Twickenham is a patchwork of architectural styles and influences, partially a fairy tale castle, partially a Gothic cathedral, *The Castle of Otranto* is equally weaved of various literary styles and motifs,

including elements of horror, dark fantasy, mystery and romance, as well as historical references.

The patchwork nature of Gothic fiction became firmly incorporated into the literary genre of the 19th century, and soon became its trademark feature. Subsequently, Gothic fiction marched into the 20th century with equal vigour thanks to the new and fast-expanding medium of cinema. The genre proved to be cinema friendly very early on. In the introduction to the 2002 book *Wokół gotycyzmów* [Around Gothicisms], the editors posit that "[…] film, since the era of German Expressionism, essentially from its very beginnings, has creatively utilised the Gothic legacy, and many cinematic works have vividly and spectacularly contributed to the current form of the Gothic convention" (Gazda, Izdebska, Płóciennik 2002: 10). In the new millennium, numerous classic Gothic tales continue being adapted from novels to the silver screen, gaining new lives through macabre visual spectacles made even more appealing by ever-evolving technology.

Over the years, the vampire protagonist of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* became one of the biggest Gothic sensations of all time, eventually resulting in the instigation of the pop-cultural vampire craze of the 20th and 21st centuries. The first surviving adaptation of Stoker's seminal novel dates back to 1922. Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau's silent classic of German Expressionism, released under the title of *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror* (*Nosferatu — Eine Symphonie des Grauens*), remains one of the biggest masterpieces of early cinema. In time, many subsequent productions secured the status of classic *Dracula* movies or TV shows, including Tod Browning's first talking adaptation of *Dracula* (1931), Terence Fisher's post-war *Horror of Dracula* (1958), Francis Ford Coppola's heavily romanticised *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992), or the controversial 2020 BBC mini-series by Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat, *Dracula*. At the start of the 21st century, Dracula still remains "the most filmed character in film history after Sherlock Holmes" (Belford 1996: XV).

Dracula of the second half of the 20th century, as well as his post--millennial imaginings, constitute a patchwork of several decades of the character's pop cultural transfigurations: from Polidori's and Bram Stoker's literary texts, through numerous screen adaptations and new vampire novels, to comic books, computer games, digital art, toys and merchandise. In fact, as James Holte claims, at some point the name Dracula became synonymous with the term vampire (Holte 1997: VIII). Contemporary images of Dracula combine the features of several seminal vampire figures. Bram Stoker's original vision of a well-versed vampiric aristocrat from Transylvania is transformed into a demonic, bloodthirsty,

instinct-driven monster in Murnau's *Nosferatu* (performed by Max Schreck), forever linking a horrifying and unearthly rat-like physique to the vampire imagery. A more refined version of Dracula, sporting his famous black cape for the first time on screen, appeared in the first Universal adaptation directed by Tod Browning and performed by Béla Lugosi. Hungarian by birth, Lugosi equipped Dracula with his distinctive native eastern accent (a marker of otherness). Along with the aristocratic poise, charm and sex appeal of Lugosi's version, the accent was to become a constant feature of the cinematic Dracula in many subsequent versions. According to Anna Gemra, "[t]he restrained, refined portrayal of Dracula as an aristocrat who corrupts innocent girls at night turned out to be not only a box office hit but also a model for virtually all subsequent cultural texts featuring vampires" (Gemra 2008: 206).

The post WWII movies brought colour, gripping special effects and a more daring approach to the subjects of eroticism and violence. Christopher Lee starred in the 1958 British production of *Dracula*, directed by Terence Fisher, which popularised the image of a vampire with sharp fangs. Francis Ford Coppola's 1992 *Bram Stoker's Dracula* was responsible for romanticising and humanising Dracula by providing him with a pre--vampire back-story, as well as focusing on the romantic aspect of his relationship with Mina. Such alterations to the vampire character became consolidated over time through numerous novels, films and television series that reiterated these patterns.

Ann Rice's novel *Interview with the Vampire* (1976), and its 1994 cinematic version directed by Neil Jordan, present a vampire who despises his new undead existence and, driven by moral dilemmas, is averse to killing humans. In *The Twilight Saga* (2008–2012), the 21st-century bestselling young adult novels by Stephenie Meyer and their subsequent adaptations, the vampire protagonist Edward Cullen is a "vegetarian" who refuses to drink human blood, choosing instead to feed on animals. Believing that he has lost his soul, and is therefore doomed to damnation, he refuses to turn his human lover into a vampire. He fears that doing so would condemn his beloved to a similar pitiful fate. Humanisation of a vampire figure is also conspicuous in the popular children's animated film series *Hotel Transylvania* (2012–2022), wherein all the fellow monsters occupying Dracula's castle, including Frankenstein's monster, the werewolf and the mummy (among others), are humanised heroes, hiding from dangerous and cruel people. Count Dracula himself is an exemplary father for his daughter Mavis and half-human grandson Dennis. In her book, Catherine Spooner observes the emergence and

consolidation of "happy Gothic" (Spooner 2017: 22) in the latter part of the 20th century. As a result of this process, the post-millennial vampire begins to be presented as sympathetic. The changes made to the vampire archetype, along with the enduring fascination of creators and audiences with vampire tales in the new millennium, demonstrate the ongoing popularity of the subject matter and the modernised vampire character. A modern vampire constitutes a unique blend of the original vampire protagonist with new and fresh ideas, resulting in a captivating and intriguing cultural patchwork.

A similar tendency can be observed in the case of female vampires. Carmilla, the celebrated titular protagonist of Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's 1872 novella, is often considered a literary female vampire prototype. Predating Stoker's novel by over a quarter of a century, Carmilla is a high society lesbian vampire preying on the minds and blood of young aristocratic ladies. However, unlike Count Dracula's cold predatory liaisons with his victims, Carmilla's relationships do not exclude emotional involvement, allowing the readers to interpret the character in terms of partnership and companionship rather than viewing her as a mere parasite. Nevertheless, this trait will not become common in female vampires until the 21st century.

Another female vampire figure firmly fixed in popular culture is Elisabeth Báthory, the alleged 16th-century Hungarian serial killer, whom Gemra directly calls a "maniacal murderess" (Gemra 2008: 79). She is purported to have murdered hundreds of young virgins, bathing in their blood in order to preserve her youth and beauty. In time, historical records and witness testimonies turned into folklore tales of the Countess' vampiric nature. The blood-soaked legends stirred the imagination of 20th--century filmmakers, granting Báthory immortality on the silver screen through many cinematic productions.

The first century of cinema offered numerous examples of savage, demonic female vampire figures (for example 1960's *Brides of Dracula*, or 1971's *Countess Dracula*). The first two decades of the new millennium promoted a more complex image of the female vampire, on both the big and the small screen, combining the two aforementioned patterns. The vampiresses in popular films and TV shows, including *The Twilight Saga*, *The Vampire Diaries* (2009–2017), *Byzantium* (2012), *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2013), and *Hotel Transylvania* (2012–2022), are sophisticated women with high aspirations who aim to maintain and cultivate human values (education, culture, family) in their vampire lives, whilst simultaneously attempting to make the most of their supernatural alter-ego. Family ties

seem to be the focal point of all the above examples. Other aspects aside, this peculiar development can serve as a strong support for the thesis of the female vampire's evolution. To a large extent, as in the case of male vampire characters, 21st-century vampiresses became humanised, straying a fair distance from their archetypal monstrous form.

The first part of this article has explored the evolution of vampire Gothic literature and cinema, tracing the transformation of vampire characters from monstrous and predatory figures into complex and empathetic beings. The humanisation of both male and female vampire characters in the 21st century reflects a shift towards exploring their internal struggles, emotions, and moral dilemmas. This examination of the evolving nature of vampire characters sets the stage for the subsequent subchapter, which will delve into the realm of Polish vampire cinema. By examining the sparse but unique contributions of Polish filmmakers and their blending of western cinematic traditions with Polish culture and history, the chapter will offer a detailed overview of the distinct elements that shape Polish vampire narratives and their place within the broader realm of vampire Gothic cinema.

POLISH HORROR CINEMA

While the Polish literary market is abundant with horrors, Polish cinema has conspicuously avoided the genre for decades. The subject of Gothic, once recognised as an inextricable part of Western tradition, has often been treated with caution by Polish filmmakers, who have frequently chosen more familiar Slavic and local settings and subject matter for their films. After regaining independence in 1918, Polish morale and artistic atmosphere was far from the dark mood offered by the horror genre. Instead, the silver screen was filled with spirited comedies, tearful romances and historical dramas. The silent era produced only three Polish cinematic horrors: *Satan's Son* (*Syn szatana*) by Bruno Bredschneider (1923); Henryk Bigoszt's *Atakualpa* (1924), and *Szamota's Mistress* (*Kochanka Szamoty*) by Leon Trystan (1927). The last of these three was based on a short story by prolific Polish horror writer Stefan Grabiński, often referred to as a Polish Lovecraft. *Szamota's Mistress* presented a story of romance between an unsuspecting young man and his long-dead mistress, and bore the features of Gothic aesthetics. Unfortunately, none of the above-mentioned pictures have survived the passage of time. During the interwar period, Polish-Jewish director Michał Waszyński crafted another film that aligned with Gothic stylistics, both visually and thematically. Set

in Jewish culture and filmed in Yiddish, *The Dybbuk* (*Der Dibuk*, 1937), remains the greatest gem of Polish-Jewish filmmaking. Even today, this story of a young girl possessed by the spirit of her dead lover (the dybbuk) on the eve of her wedding, and filmed in the visual style of German Expressionism, mesmerises with the gloom and dread of its tragic folkloric tale.

The Second World War completed stifled the development of Polish filmmaking, and the subsequent era of social realism offered little room for the exploration of fantastical themes. In fact, it was not until the 1960s that horror returned to Polish screens, with a series of television productions under the title *Extraordinary Stories* (*Opowieści niezwykłe*, 1967–1968), consisting of five adaptations of Polish short stories and novellas. Soon, other TV shows followed, presenting classic horror tales by Oscar Wilde (*The Canterville Ghost* [1967]) and Aleksey Tolstoy (*The Vampire* [*Упырь*, 1967]), among others.

The next two decades offered several interesting Polish cinema horrors, including *Lokis: A Manuscript of Professor Wittembach* (*Lokis. Rękopis profesora Wittembacha*, 1970) directed by Janusz Majewski, Andrzej Żuławski's *The Devil* (*Diabeł*, 1972), Marek Piestrak's *The She-Wolf* (*Wilczyca* 1983) and its sequel *Return of the She-Wolf* (*Powrót wilczycy*, 1990), Marek Nowicki's *The Phantom* (*Widziadło*, 1984), Jacek Koprowicz's highly acclaimed *Medium* (1985), and Grzegorz Warchoł's vampire film *I Like Bats* (*Lubię nietoperze*, 1986). With the ever-growing popularity of Hollywood Gothic cinema in the second half of the 20th century, many of the visual and thematic constituents of the classic Gothic genre permeated the hermetic Polish moviemaking industry. Despite the awareness of Western trends, Polish filmmakers chose to domesticate the subject by setting their stories in Polish villages and small towns, drawing upon Slavic folklore and its fantastical characters while addressing contemporary national socio-political problems. Film historian Vladimir Gromov accurately interprets the nature of Polish horror cinema in the following paragraph: "Some of the most interesting horror films were made during the time under the communist regime in Poland. Even now, after a few decades, these films pique the audience's curiosity: the horror of Poland under communism was devoid of the usual clichés of the genre and therefore stands out as unique. The creators of these pictures do not only tell scary stories to frighten the audience. The genre gives them the opportunity to talk about serious things, to show distortions of life and its unexplainable excesses" (Gromov 2017).

Lokis draws on the folkloric tales of therianthropy, a recurring motif in Slavic mythology. The movie is an oneiric costume period piece set in

the 19th century, in which Wittembach (Edmund Fetting), a professor of folklore, gets entangled in a dark mystery surrounding his host's family. As a young wife, the host's mother had been attacked by a bear, while he himself is believed by the local peasants to be the son of a bear. Death and other unexplained dramatic events follow.

The She-Wolf and its sequel are also based on folkloric tales of shapeshifting. Both films realise the classic Gothic monster scenario (with an additional femme fatale motif), and touch upon themes of curses, possessions, fatal infatuations and the supernatural. Interestingly, though not uncommonly, the plot, set in 1848, dwells on the subject of Polish liberation, referring to a particular national trend in Polish Romanticism. The era of Romantic literature in Poland coincided with the partitioning of the country by Russia, Prussia, and Austria, leading to its disappearance from maps for over a century. As a result, Polish Romantic works are imbued with a sense of yearning for the lost country and are fuelled by inspiring visions of the nation's liberation and resurrection. Tadeusz Lubelski notes that "these films equate evil with the sin of national betrayal" (Lubelski 2009: 495).

Andrzej Żuławski's *The Devil* is a political allegory disguised as a costume horror drama, discussing contemporary socio-political problems of reborn antisemitic sentiments and the student riots of the 1960s. Banned for 16 years by the communist authorities in Poland, Żuławski's masterpiece is "a horror about humanity, about the evil hidden in people and waiting to be released and expressed. Żuławski's evil did not come from the outside, but resounded like the inner voice of the hero. The devil in Wojciech Pszoniak's masterful interpretation was only the midwife of evil, not its source" (Culture.pl). The film offers neither a happy ending, nor a tension release. At the end, the viewers are left with a burdensome sense of hopelessness and madness.

Despite the commercial success of all the above-mentioned films, perhaps the title of the most highly acclaimed Polish horror belongs to Koprowicz's *Medium*. For the first time in Polish cinematic history, the film tackles the theme of the occult. Moreover, in contrast to previously recalled costume horrors set in the 19th century or earlier, the plot of *Medium* takes place in the 1930s, when the dread of the Nazi regime was only just beginning to creep into our streets and minds. On one October day, driven by an unknown force, three people set off for the seaside town of Sopot. At the same time, a woman senses the presence of a powerful medium, controlling the lives of the three travellers. As the plot unfolds, the protagonists try to solve the source of mysterious events that link them

together and ultimately lead them to a specific house. Murder, the occult, and supernatural psychic powers form the core of the film. As Krzysztof Walecki claims, "In *Medium,* the Gothic setting is replaced by the spectre of slowly approaching annihilation and the end of an era — the costume changes to a less distant one and definitely closer to the viewer of the time, who [in the 1980s] could still feel the war repercussions first-hand" (Walecki 2023). Filled with suspense and interesting plot twists, to this day it still bears the status of the big screen's most ambitious Polish horror film.

Polish horror cinema of the new millennium is marked by a wide variety of foreign trends and styles. However, the fascination with local legends and folklore is also reflected in recent productions such as Mariusz Pujszo's contemporary Gothic story *The Legend* (*Legenda,* 2005), Marcin Wrona's *The Demon* (*Demon,* 2015), recalling the aforementioned Jewish folklore tale of the dybbuk, or the acclaimed modern take on the mermaid theme, *The Lure* (*Córki dancingu,* 2015) by Agnieszka Smoczyńska. Adrian Panek's *The Werewolf* (*Wilkołak,* 2018) constitutes a psychological horror broaching the subjects of guilt and trauma. Moreover, the 21st century witnessed the emergence of the first ever slashers produced in Poland: *Nobody Sleeps in the Woods Tonight* (*W lesie dziś nie zaśnie nikt,* part 1: 2020, part 2: 2021), directed by Bartosz Kowalski, and Jan Belcl's *All my Friends are Dead* (*Wszyscy moi przyjaciele nie żyją,* 2020), each paying homage to the classic American slasher genre. Polish cinematic horror continues to evolve, drawing on traditional folklore, contemporary issues, and international influences, while also creating compelling narratives that reflect the complexities of Polish society and culture.

POLISH VAMPIRE FILMS

The Polish film scene is not devoid of the theme of vampirism. The Polish screen welcomed the subject through the 1980 black-and-white TV show *Carmilla,* an adaptation of Le Fanu's famous novella directed by Janusz Kondratiuk. Like its literary original and subsequent western film versions, the show offered an interesting take on the vampire genre, with its exploration of the female perspective and themes of sexuality and desire. These fell on fertile ground in the increasingly daring visual culture of Poland in the 1980s. Although remembered mostly for its stellar cast, *Carmilla* remains a significant contribution to the history of Polish screen horror.

The first cinematic vampire movie in Polish history was released six years later. *I Like Bats* (*Lubię nietoperze,* 1986), directed by Grzegorz

Warchoł, presents a fascinating combination of Eastern and Western influences, forming a patchwork of styles. Set in the 1980s during the harsh reality of the Polish People's Republic, the film stands apart from other Polish horror movies, the majority of which constitute historical costume productions. Drawing from well-established Western vampire lore, the film centres around Iza (Katarzyna Walter), an enchanting female vampire predator whose story firmly establishes her as a prominent figure among a distinguished lineage of female vampires, while also unmistakably portraying her as a product of Polish (Eastern) culture. Iza is a complex character with a deep fascination for bats and their nocturnal habits. In her book, Maria Janion identifies the bat motif in the following words: "The people fear the supernatural powers associated with bats, which are believed to be linked to hell, and refer to them as 'evil spirits' capable of harming both humans and animals. […] The anti-solar nature of bats, similar to that of vampires, signifies in popular beliefs their dedication to the service of dark forces. Stoker, with particular fondness, depicts Dracula as a huge bat that flutters against the windows of Lucy's bedroom, sometimes breaking them and lunging to drink the blood of his victim. His cloak in his 'human' form is a sign of bat wings" (Janion 2002: 156). Throughout the film, the viewers are offered a number of purely Gothic scenes showcasing Iza's interactions with vampire bats, evoking such classic vampire horror images and iconography. Michał Wolski also observes that Iza's portrayal aligns with Western conventions: "[…] her nocturnal lifestyle, iconic fangs, and the way she selects her victims clearly and openly correspond with the Western cinema of attractions, including the already established (and by some even ridiculed […]) image of the vampire" (Wolski 2016: 92). Simultaneously, the narrative reflects the awkwardness and tediousness of Polish socio-political circumstances in that decade. Iza struggles to make a living, working at an antique shop during the day and performing in a nightclub at night. Despite her apparent acceptance of her vampire nature, she becomes bored with it and yearns for a different path in life. After a chance encounter, she falls in love with a handsome psychiatrist, Doctor Jung (Marek Barbasiewicz), and seeks his professional help to cure her of her vampirism.

Iza also deviates from other traditional vampire traits: daylight does not affect her, and she does not sleep in a coffin. What makes her character particularly intriguing is her capacity for love and affection (which to some extent can also be attributed to Le Fanu's Carmilla), as well as emotions and the ability to procreate. The film's conclusion demonstrates

Iza's ability to transmit vampirism from mother to daughter, imbuing her character with a distinct and culturally prescient aspect, as it explores the theme of romantic relationships between humans and vampires and vampire motherhood, anticipating the trend by at least a decade.

Despite the bold attempts to incorporate some of the Western Gothic paradigms, *I Like Bats*, as numerous Polish films of the 1980s, can be read primarily as a socio-political metaphor. Doctor Jung's mental hospital, where Iza undergoes treatment, can be metaphorically interpreted as a microcosm that depicts contemporary societal struggles, particularly the quest for freedom and self-expression in a repressive environment. As a psychiatrist, Doctor Jung assumes the role of identifying and treating individuals deemed as threats to society. Iza, along with other patients in the hospital, represents unconventional and marginalised identities that are rejected by the mainstream. Moreover, akin to the vampire's traditional lack of mirror-reflection, Iza's body fails to appear in her X-ray, serving as a further metaphor for the social insignificance of individuals within an oppressive political system. Thus, masquerading as inconsequential entertainment, the film delivers a severe critique of contemporary times.

The patchwork character of Warchoł's movie can also be observed at a compositional level. The film combines elements of numerous genres, including horror, romance, comedy and drama. As Robert Dudziński states: "It is difficult to unambiguously determine the genre affiliation of *I Like Bats*. The film certainly uses elements typical of horror cinema — the figure of a female vampire (along with the fascinating bats and nocturnal scenery evoking a sense of otherworldliness), mysterious murders, etc. It also reaches for the imagery of romance, showing Iza's fascination with doctor Jung and their love affair. At the same time, however, the film incorporates scenes with a distinctly comedic character, and the action is set in a surreal and somewhat bizarre world. In this way, the film simultaneously uses certain genre elements with full seriousness and ironically distances itself from them" (Dudziński, Wolski 2018: 105).

Although not a huge commercial success, *I Like Bats* was a courageous attempt at establishing Poland's own vampire cinema. The film was produced during a period when Polish filmmakers were increasingly embracing Western patterns and genres that to date had been relatively unexplored in the country. This fashion coincided with the growth in popularity and availability of VHS tapes offering an abundance of classics and samples of Hollywood cinema to audiences brought up on (and disillusioned with) Eastern Bloc films. Portrayals of erotic fantasies, nakedness, violence, horror and supernatural characters provided an easy

and entertaining way to escape the dreary reality of the communist regime. However, as indicated earlier, Polish filmmakers of that era chose to blend Western genre traditions with indigenous folkloric elements and Slavic mythology within domestic settings. Iza can easily be interpreted as a contemporary embodiment of folklore figures such as an "upiór" or "strzyga", both closely connected to Slavic vampiric lore. Anita Has--Tokarz recalls Władysław Kopaliński's definition of a vampire as follows: "In the context of Slavic folk demonology, a vampire denotes an 'upiór', the spirit of a deceased heretic, apostate, cursed individual, or criminal who returns to the world in the form of a gigantic bat to suck the blood of sleeping people, who in turn become vampires themselves" (Kopaliński quoted in Has-Tokarz 2002: 167). The term "strzyga", according to Has--Tokarz, derives from the word "lamia". "In ancient folklore, a lamia was a type of sexual vampire who sucked blood from men, depriving them of their sexual energy" (Has-Tokarz 2002: 168). The "strzyga" was often represented as a bird with human female breasts. Both the bat iconography and the femme fatale motif are prominently featured and significant in *I Like Bats*. The film navigates the complexities of identity and heritage through Iza, who embodies the dual nature of the "strzyga" — simultaneously alluring and deadly. The narrative delves into the protagonist's struggle with her supernatural identity, juxtaposed against her desire for normalcy, mirroring the conflicted existence of the "strzyga", between the human and the monstrous.

The curious phenomenon of 1980s' Polish cinema, affected as it was by the scarcity of funds available for filmmakers, continues to attract the attention of subsequent generations, especially those born after the fall of communism. Interestingly, while *I Like Bats* has been mostly forgotten in Poland, the film seems to be gathering accolades abroad. In 2022, in a review by a multi award-winning film critic and journalist, Alexandra Heller-Nicholas from Melbourne, Australia, the film was described as: "A dark little treasure just waiting for cult film beatification, *I Like Bats* is the best '80s vampire film you've never seen" (Heller-Nicholas 2022).

Polish audiences had to wait three decades for another home-spun vampire film. When it finally appeared in 2010, the film was again far from an archetypal horror. Juliusz Machulski's *The Lullaby* represents the already well-established genre of Hollywood comedy horrors. The first parodies of the filmic horror genre followed the wave of success of pre-war Universal monster films, and from the outset aimed at deconstructing the ethos of terror and dread. Productions like Charles Barton's series, featuring Abbot and Costello with their comic encounters with such classical horror

mainstays as Dracula and Frankenstein's monster, directly contributed to establishing the new hybrid genre. Comedy horror, toying with traditional horror convention by means of laughter-evoking tricks, aimed to familiarise and ridicule well-known and once-fearsome characters, reducing them to objects of fun by means of presenting them in an incongruous way (Carroll 1999: 157). This new tendency to combine humour with horror proved to be a successful venture, easily whetting audiences' appetites for new cocktails of fear and fun.

In 1967, Roman Polański directed *The Fearless Vampire Killers (or Pardon Me, But Your Teeth Are in My Neck)*, a seminal vampire comedy horror. Alas, although filmed by a Polish director, it is a Hollywood production for which the Polish film industry can claim no credit. Thus, *I Like Bats* and *The Lullaby* remain the rare examples of Polish vampire films. In *The Lullaby*, Juliusz Machulski, an acclaimed director of numerous comedic blockbusters of the 1980s and 1990s, enters into a dialogue with the Western vampire myth. The plot revolves around the Makarewicz family, consisting of three generations of vampires: 550-year-old grandpa (Janusz Chabior), his son Michał (Robert Więckiewicz), his daughter-in--law Bożena (Małgorzata Buczkowska-Szlenkier) and their three children. In search of food and stability, they all move into a small Masurian village called Odlotowo, taking up employment as folk artists. Soon after their arrival a folk artist disappears in unexplained circumstances. Later, more mysterious disappearances are reported by the locals, while viewers are presented with a chain of events and gags sustained in the classic dark comedy style.

Regardless of the shift in scenery from the wilds of 19th-century Transylvania, the quintessential Gothic space popularised by Stoker's *Dracula*, all the way to modern day Poland, *The Lullaby* indicates the director's profound knowledge and respect of vampire cinema history. In a way, the film constitutes a homage to the most celebrated cinematic versions of *Dracula* and other vampire classics, which becomes conspicuous in numerous visual citations, including elements of the *mise-en-scène* Gothic atmosphere (lunar landscapes, hooting owls, howling wolves, and so on) along with Gothic themes, costumes and characterisations. In his book, Artur Majer describes *The Lullaby* as "an attempt to marry Polish social comedy with horror" (Majer 2014: 333). Furthermore, he claims that "the film defends itself only with what it adopts, reinterprets and discusses from the tradition of horror cinema" (Majer 2014: 333). Regardless of the somewhat critical approach of the critic, Machulski seems to be realising the Polish patchwork version

of cinematic horror, which happens to coincide with the global new millennium vampire trends.

The daylight scenery in *The Lullaby* is far from Gothic. Odlotowo, a small rural village, exists in a state of isolation from civilisation, appearing almost frozen in time. The absence of any signs of progress or modernity creates an atmosphere where nothing seems to happen, perpetuating a sense of stillness and stagnation. However, the night--time landscape is far from the idyllic visions of Polish countryside. Full moons, wild nature, howling wolves and the restless hooting of owls bring to mind images straight from the pages of Gothic novels. The wild nature, akin to Bram Stoker's "children of the night" (Stoker 2016 [1897]: 20), seems to follow the vampires from Transylvania to Masuria, heralding extraordinary events and supernatural forces. The use of German expressionistic lighting and Michał Lorenc's haunting musical composition heighten the atmosphere of tension and horror, creating a more immersive and unsettling experience.

Although the Makarewicz family escapes an easy categorisation, its members manifestly reflect some of the prominent vampire archetypes known from seminal 20th-century screen adaptations. These include Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau's 1922 masterpiece. Grandpa Makarewicz is a tall, grotesque and withered figure, with one fang and a missing eye. Undoubtedly closer to Nosferatu than the vision of the out-of-this-world lover currently cultivated in cinema and TV by the new millennium. In contrast, his son Michał, with his luminous eyes and elegant attire, seems to continue the canon of beautiful vampires started by Béla Lugosi in Tod Browning's 1931 *Dracula*. Nevertheless, their similarity to the classic film portrayals of Dracula, although evident in the vampires' costumes and stylisation during the family's regular night-time macabre concerts, is diluted by their local manner, casual attire and ways of dealing with everyday affairs. One of the recurring sources of humour is the contrast between the typical vampire tropes, highlighted by the characters' appearance, and the mundane, everyday life of the Makarewicz family. The family has to work and earn money running a petite business belonging to the original owner of the house (a folk sculptor), whilst trying to blend in with the local community. They also need to deal with modern technological advances, such as mobile phones and laptops, and argue about typical family problems, relationship matters and daily chores. All these elements result in a curious patchwork of characters, combining traits of Gothic vampire archetypes with pop-culture-processed products of mass imagination, coincidentally thrust into a rudimentary

Polish village milieu, which all serve as a constant source of incongruity and humour.

Another aspect of Machulski's vampiric lore worth scrutinising in *The Lullaby* is its representation of female vampires and vampire children. Bożena unmistakably alludes to a lineage of cinematic vampiresses, while the Makarewicz children captivate with their unsettling and eerie presence, evoking the same sense of unease and terror as vampire children in timeless horror films. At least at first glance. The effect brought about by juxtaposition of contradictory notions of motherhood, childhood innocence and purity vs. madness, bestiality and otherworldliness, is, however, mitigated and ridiculed by the obvious warm and caring familial relations between the family members. The vampire protagonists take care of each other, of their needs and feelings, on both a biological and spiritual level. During the day they work, learn and feed, whilst at night they rest and play music together.

Although clearly of a supernatural nature, the family fails to thoroughly fit into the traditional model of Gothic demons. Their faces are pale (like Dracula's), but at the same time they are day-walkers and not harmed by sunlight. The latter feature links them to the popular new millennial model promoted in numerous vampire youth-oriented productions including *Blade* (1998–2004), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997––2003), *The Vampire Diaries* (2009–2017) and *The Twilight Saga* (2008––2012).[1] Similarly, the Makarewicz vampires are trying to assimilate with the local population. This proves difficult at times since their strange piercing gaze attracts immediate attention, despite the fact that, at first glance, there is little to distinguish them from the crowd, aside from their pale complexion (they follow current fashion and use relatively modern language). Traditionally, a vampire's gaze can hypnotise their victim, making them susceptible to suggestion and subject to the manipulation of their will. According to Manuela Dunn-Mascetti, "because death is in his [vampire] sight, the victim is hypnotised and invited into the world of vampires" (Dunn-Mascetti 2010: 72). If the Makarewicz vampires do not hypnotise in the literal sense, they certainly stun their interlocutors into confusion. This ultimately gives similar results. Thus, with little

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[1] Daywalkers appear in vampire productions in the second half of the 20th century (e.g. *Near Dark*, 1987), but the model of vampires capable of walking and functioning during the day gained in strength and began being considered the new norm only in the new millennium. Interestingly, Bram Stoker's Dracula was originally not threatened by sunlight, which only made him weaker. The idea of lethal effect of sunlight upon vampires can be attributed to folklore beliefs and early 20th-century cinema.

resistance, the guests who arrive at the farm disappear without a trace. In a series of comical sequences involving luring victims into a barn and hiding their cars, the viewer learns that the visitors are kidnapped in order to satisfy the culinary needs of the vampires. Faithful to the classic convention, *The Lullaby* vampires feed on blood, which, in the era of mass media and the rapid spread of information, is a luxury commodity and one difficult to come by. The Makarewiczes are not "vegetarians".[2] However, unlike their fellow vampires in many 20th-century movies, they do not kill their victims, but rather release them after treating them to an "oblivion" potion. After a few hours, they awake somewhere in the village, with an empty vodka bottle in their pocket, suggesting to them an alternative reason for their blackout.

Another traditional vampire trait possessed by Machulski's vampires is the ability to disappear and invisibly relocate. This feature allows them to travel and to escape unwanted situations, as well as get into places unnoticed. Due to their immortality, traditional vampires are by nature nomads, not destined for a quiet and settled existence. Change of scenery and movement are therefore intrinsic parts of the vampire experience. In the first scenes of *The Lullaby*, the Makarewiczes appear in Odlotowo with Grandpa's words: "Nice house, but what will we live on here?" In typical Polish style, the same question is repeated in the film's ending, in which the viewers watch the vampires move into the Presidential Palace in Warsaw. Thus, *The Lullaby* becomes a voice in the discussion on Polish socio-political issues. Interestingly, filmmakers have often treated vampires as a metaphor of a poor social situation. Siegfried Kracauer (2004, pp. 43–115) viewed the figure of Nosferatu in the context of the looming tyranny of Nazism, while later vampire films are frequently interpreted in terms of other social problems, including class conflict, colonialism, gender and sexuality issues (Morrissette 2013). Hollywood Gothic cinema in general, and particularly vampire films, exhibit notable postcolonial tendencies that reveal underlying anxieties about race, otherness, and cultural domination. These films often reflect and reinforce Western colonial perspectives, portraying vampires as exotic, foreign invaders who threaten the stability and purity of the Western world. This narrative framework echoes colonial fears of the "other" and the perceived need to control or eliminate those who deviate from the

[2] In *The Twilight Saga*, the term "vegetarian" is used to describe the nutritional habits of the Cullen family, who refuse to feed on humans and instead satisfy their needs with animal blood.

norm (recall the psychiatric hospital in *I Like Bats*). In many vampire films, the vampire's foreignness is emphasised through accents (e.g. Bela Lugosi's Dracula), clothing, and settings that mark them as distinctly non--Western. Furthermore, these films frequently explore themes of cultural assimilation and resistance, with vampires symbolising the invasive force of colonialism that must be subdued by the "civilised" West. By doing so, Hollywood Gothic cinema perpetuates an opposition between the West and the "other", reinforcing stereotypes and power dynamics rooted in colonial history. The fascination with and fear of the vampire as a figure of the foreign invader also reflects broader anxieties about globalisation and cultural homogenisation. Some of these tendencies are also present in *The Lullaby*, despite the film's Slavic setting and characters' distinctive profiles. The Makarewicz family maintain their status as suspicious and excentric outsiders in the village of Odlotowo. At the same time, their circumstances effectively mirror the problems and struggles of average citizens.

The Lullaby and its vampires serve to unveil some of the shortcomings in contemporary Polish economic and political issues through the use of clichéd pop-cultural themes and absurd characters. Unemployment, poverty, injustice, narrow-mindedness, prejudice and distrust towards the government are some of the issues covertly commented upon in the film. It is no accident that the Makarewiczes' victims are representatives of carefully selected social strata: a policeman, a priest, a social worker, a journalist and a German businessman (who at the end of the film wakes up wearing a German World War II helmet). All of the characters, vampires and victims alike, are seen dancing together in the last sequence of the film. The ludicrous final scenes evoke the danse macabre motif and refer to the traditional dance *topos* in Polish culture. In his book on Machulski, Artur Majer posits that dancing in *The Lullaby* signifies the lack of other choices: "one simply must dance, whether in hypnosis, forgetfulness, or due to opportunism. […] As the name of the dance and the title of the film suggest, it lulls the human mind to sleep and eliminates the ability to form a reflection" (Majer 2014: 340). *The Lullaby* is therefore a clear political satire, in which, according to Majer, "we agree to dance and, more or less justifiably, we foolishly sway to the rhythm of vampire music" (Majer 2014: 341).

It seems there is no better way to portray the paradox of the surrounding reality than in the form of a black comedy. Joylessly, we laugh at the dichotomy between the absurd comedy of facts and the horror of reality. The incongruity between the old and the new demonic models, as well as the mixture of Western tradition with Slavonic folk tropes and

Polish current affairs presented in the film, are also amusing. *The Lullaby*, with its hybridised model of the supernatural and the real diegetic world, along with the blend of characters and opposing genres, can visibly serve as an example of post-millennial patchwork Gothic.

Both *I Like Bats* and *The Lullaby* present vampires as members of a secret society, by necessity operating in the shadows and, regardless of the clumsy attempts at assimilation, detached from human society. However, the differences in the way the vampire world and characters are presented in both films are conspicuous. The protagonist of *I Like Bats*, Iza, is depicted as a sophisticated, complex woman aspiring to make her life easy and pleasant. At times, she is portrayed as cunning and manipulative, using her powers to manoeuvre humans for the sake of her own (mainly culinary) gains. In contrast, *The Lullaby* presents the vampire world as more raw and primal with the Makarewicz family living in an isolated rural area and surviving on the blood of unwilling human victims. Despite the romantic subplot in *I Like Bats*, it is in *The Lullaby* that the vampires are shown as more emotional and vulnerable, with their human side still present as they struggle with the morality of their actions. Interestingly, against the traditional vampire patterns, the motif of family constitutes an important element of both films. The Makarewicz vampires form a family (biologically and socially) from the very start. Therefore, the relationships between its members seem more mundane, down-to--earth and static. *I Like Bats* offers the voyeuristic excitement of witnessing the two lovers' romantic journey. The ride is all the more attractive for shattering vampiric tradition in its entirety by means of allowing the success of the human-vampire romantic liaison, which in addition finalises with the birth of a vampiric offspring, curing Iza of her vampirism in the process. Overall, both films blend Western cinematic tradition with unique Polish culture and history, presenting vampires as complex and multi-dimensional characters with a rich cultural heritage. Moreover, both films realise the new millennial trends of humanising vampires, which in the case of *I Like Bats* (released in 1986) seems prophetic.

In conclusion, Polish vampire films represent a unique hybridisation of Western and Slavic elements and tropes, reflecting a deep engagement with local Slavic cultural legacy. They often incorporate the Gothic aesthetic and narrative structures typical of Western vampire cinema, while simultaneously infusing them with distinctly Slavic folklore, mythology, and cultural motifs. This blend is evident in the portrayal of vampires that not only adhere to the universal archetype of the bloodthirsty undead, but also embody characteristics of Slavic

mythological creatures such as the aforementioned "strzyga" and "upiór". The films explore themes of identity, heritage, and the supernatural through a lens heavily informed by the country's historical and cultural contexts. The integration of traditional Slavic rituals, beliefs, and landscapes creates a cinematic tapestry that both honours and reinterprets the rich — but often overlooked — Slavic mythos within the framework of a globally recognised genre. This patchwork hybridisation not only enriches the narrative complexity of Polish vampire films, but also contributes to a broader understanding of how local cultural legacies can be preserved and transformed through contemporary cinema. By merging Western Gothic with Slavic elements, these films offer a unique perspective that challenges and expands the conventional boundaries of vampire lore.

Both vampire films analysed above, as well as other horrors mentioned herein, represent exemplary works of patchwork Gothic. All of them blend elements of Western Gothic with Polish folklore and contemporary issues. As part of the broader Polish horror tradition, they also reference Polish Romanticism and national socio-political problems. By bringing together different cultural elements in their patchwork structure, these films exemplify the unique character of Polish Gothic horror. Ultimately, the power of Polish screen horror lies in its ability to connect with audiences on a visceral level, while also offering a profound commentary on the cultural and historical context from which it arises.

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Abstract

The article explores the emergence of Gothic elements in Polish cinema, specifically in the realm of vampire films. Despite the Polish literary market being saturated with horror, Polish cinema has conspicuously shied away from the genre for decades. However, the popularity of Hollywood Gothic cinema has influenced the once-hermetic Polish film industry, leading to the inclusion of classic Gothic themes, characters, and visuals in Polish vampire films. The article delves into the history of Polish horror cinema, and its relation to Hollywood Gothic cinema, whilst focusing on the vampire aspect of horror. In addition, it highlights the concept of "patchwork Gothic", which involves blending elements of western and Slavic cultures, aesthetics and characters. By analysing two Polish vampire films, *I Like Bats* (1985) and *The Lullaby* (2010), in reference to the notion of patchwork Gothic, the author argues that the combination of disparate cultural influences creates a unique and dynamic interpretation of the Gothic genre in Polish cinema.

key words: Gothic horror, patchwork Gothic, vampire, vampire cinema, Polish cinema