



Book Review

Phases of the Moon: A Cultural History of the Werewolf Film

Craig Ian Mann
Edinburgh University Press, 2020

272pp.

In *Phases of the Moon: A Cultural History of the Werewolf Film*, Craig Ian Mann takes the reader on a rich exploration of the cinematic figure of the werewolf throughout the years predominantly in, but not restricted to, horror narratives. As indicated in the title of the book, Mann proposes a new approach to the study of the monster that departs from, what he calls, the ahistorical and reductive psychoanalytical interpretation of the werewolf as the “beast within” (10). Mann’s conclusions are similar to those seen in zombie and vampire scholarship (Auerbach 1995; Waller 1986; Abbott 2007); however, as he writes throughout, the main goal of the book is not to provide original conclusions regarding the films’ subtext, but to show that the lupine monster can be read as more than a monstrous eruption of the psyche and that it can be a versatile metaphor to explore contemporary, culturally-based anxieties and fears.

Mann recognises the work that has already been done on the cultural reading of the werewolf, citing many studies, such as Hannah Priest’s *She-Wolf: A Cultural History of Female Werewolves* (2015) and Sam George and Bill Hughes’s *In the Company of Wolves: Werewolves, Wolves and Wild Children* (2020), but he identifies gaps in the literature—especially in that no such book focuses solely on the cinematic form of the monster, which he indicates is a “particular problem in Film Studies” (8).

As mentioned above, the approach Mann chooses is not particularly new. Nor is his departure from the psychoanalytical reading of the werewolf absolute, since he recognises the theory of “the beast within” as a suitable analysis for many narratives. He sees werewolf films as malleable, offering themselves to multiple readings (10-11). He takes into consideration interviews, filmmaker’s commentaries and their larger body of work and thematic concerns. By doing this, the book broadens the scope of cinematic analysis of the werewolf film to include the possibility of psychoanalytical (depicting the werewolf as the beast within), historical

and cultural (the werewolf as the product of its time), artistic and industrial (as the product of a creative vision within the context of production) (212). One example is *Wolf* (1994), which sees the protagonist in constant conflict with his inner self while also belonging to a group of films which, in Mann's terms, deal with the "dramatisation of a white male recapturing his masculinity" in the 1990s (159).

One of the largest contributions of *Phases of the Moon* to studies of cinematic horror (and of cinema more generally), is its construction of a broad history of the lupine creature in cinema from its beginning. Indeed, a substantial part of the first chapter is dedicated to the first films to depict a werewolf, *The Werewolf* (1913) and *The White Wolf* (1914). While he is not able to offer an exhaustive reading of these films, as they have been lost, nevertheless Mann marks their historical significance. In the introduction Mann makes a case for his study by tracing the werewolf's origins back to the rise of Christianity before examining its different meanings throughout the years and locating the start of the psychologised werewolf in 19th century literature, with fictional works such as George W. M. Reynolds's *Wagner the Wehr-Wolf* (1846-7). He then groups his corpus into thematic cycles in order to understand them in a specific context—therefore the chapters are roughly in a chronological order, which follows the book's initial genealogical framing. Some of the themes explored in the book are: werewolves of foreign descent in chapter 2; she-wolves in chapters 2, 6 and 8; wolves as rebellious teenagers in chapter 3; alpha male wolves in chapter 7; and pack films in chapter 3 and 8.

The "cultural history" Mann sets out to explore is focused on North America and Europe. Although he cites British films throughout, other European films feature in only two chapters: chapter 4's analysis of British, Italian and Spanish films from the 70s; and chapter 8's brief investigation of other national cinemas, such as Canada, Denmark and New Zealand, with the films *WolfCop*, *When Animals Dream* and *What We Do In The Shadows* (all 2014), respectively. He analyses the Canadian film within a new trend of socio-political films, and the Danish within a feminist trend to depict female oppression—but he is all too brief when turning to the New Zealand film, which he cites only while listing other films. Mann explains the reason for his geographical focus by arguing that Europe and North America are the most prolific continental cinemas; however, he does acknowledge the need for further work beyond these regions.

The two most in-depth chapters are 5 ("What Big Teeth You Have") and 6 ("The Better to Eat You With"), both centering on the ascension of Reagan-era politics in the United States. Mann explains in chapter 5 that the preoccupation with bodies during the Reagan

administration (due to the growth of diet-culture, the exercise craze, and the AIDS epidemic) translated into the advances in practical effects. Mann uses *An American Werewolf in London* (1981) as an example of these trends due to its scenes of bodily transformation and decay. He later identifies the distinction between films that, in his analysis, supported conservative politics (*The Beast Within* and *Cat People*, both 1982) and those which critiqued conservatism (*Silver Bullet*, 1985). Chapter 6 picks up here and furthers each argument by devoting significant time to key historical events and then turning to the cinematic response's they evoked through satirical films such as *Teen Wolf* (1985) and *My Mom is a Werewolf* (1989), as well as outright horror films, such as *Howling IV: The Original Nightmare* (1988).

It is in chapter 8 (“Shapeshifters”) that Mann makes fresher conclusions. By looking at films released after the 2010s, he argues that contemporary films are updating themes and forming transnational cycles. He notes, for example, that post-9/11 films offer new takes on the war on terror (*Dog Soldiers* [2002], *War Wolves* [2009], *Battledogs* [2013]). And he sees the theme of gender identity and gender crisis being reworked in such films as *Big Bad Wolf* (2006), *Blood and Chocolate* (2007), *Female Werewolf* (2015), and *Wildling* (2018)—arguing that the former two update the pack films and that the latter two depict she-wolves to comment on the problematic nature of patriarchal society.

Mann closes his book reiterating the need for further academic study on the werewolf outside of psychological discourse and the need for further scholarly study mainly focused in other countries and other genres beyond horror. The extensive and encyclopaedic knowledge Mann has laid out in his book works towards this goal, and in doing so Mann equates the werewolf with the vampire and zombie as an enduring and versatile monster/metaphor. Mann relies on in-depth film analyses as well as setting historical background in each chapter, but his descriptions are far from pedantic, allowing Mann to elaborate on the book's strengths: its extensive knowledge of the lupine genealogy, its delving into the Reagan era, and its new analyses of the contemporary werewolf. His accessible language, helpful index and notes sections augment a book that is a dynamic page-turner while still being an important academic study.

— Bruna Foletto Lucas

Craig Ian Mann lectures in Film and Media Studies at Sheffield Hallam University.

Bruna Foletto Lucas is a second-year PhD student at Kingston University, London, where she is expanding her previous work on the role of the women in horror films. A filmmaker and researcher, Bruna has written film criticism and reviews for websites such as *London Horror Society* and *UK Film Review* since 2017.

- 2021 -

MONSTRUM is Published in Montréal, Québec by the Montréal Monstrum Society.
Intellectual rights are held by the individual author(s).



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).