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“Ghost Riders in the Sky”:

(Post) Colonial Tropes in Belarusian Horror Media

Alesha Serada

Abstract

The object of inquiry in this article is the subgenre of Belarusian cinematic horror, which, as of 2024, encompasses three to five exemplary cases depending on the genealogy and the degree of ‘family resemblance’. Based on the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School, I analyse structural elements of the genre and expressive means that support and disrupt them, in order to reveal the postcolonial underpinnings of the typical Belarusian horror narrative. Three most important structural elements are revealed in the narratives of Belarusian horror: the Gothic heroine, the tourist, whom I characterise as a ‘mimic man’, and the ambiguous monster – the covert representation of Belarus who is made evil by ‘slippage’ of the oppressed cinematic language. In the end, I argue that some of the same structural and expressive means have been implemented in the multimedia opera *King Stakh’s Wild Hunt* (2023) by Belarus Free Theater. Such an approach both clarifies the anticolonial message of the Wild Hunt, as well as in horror films inspired by it, and explains structural incongruities in the resulting narratives. The article's title references the American dark country song written by Stan Jones in the late 1940s.

Keywords

Uladzimir Karatkevich, Belarus, feminism, postcolonialism, national liberation, Gothic horror, film semiotics, “mimic man”.

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Introduction. The Context and Meaning of Belarusian Horror

Belarusian cinema has a long but troubled history due to the strong ideological pressure it has experienced throughout its entire existence. The same can be said about its researchers; nevertheless, some Belarusian cinematic genres have been studied in adequate depth, such as children's cinema (Kostiukevich 2020) and the horror genre, researched first and foremost by Volha Isakava. Building on the work of Isakava (Isakava 2009, 2014b, 2014a, 2023), this article uncovers the postcolonial underpinning in the typical structural elements of the Belarusian horror film genre. By doing so, I continue the academic discussion about how "horror cinema invites us to imagine Belarus in an 'unlikely' way" (Isakava 2023: 133) and support my observations with an outline of the formal features of this local subgenre. My goal here is to extend this line of inquiry onto more recent artistic attempts to communicate the experience of being a Belarusian in visual media, that is, the multimedia opera *DZikae paliavanne karalia Stakha* / *King Stakh's Wild Hunt* (Nicolai Khalezin[1] and Natalia Kaliada 2023, UK) by the Belarus Free Theater. I argue that this performance is best interpreted as a continuation of the Belarusian horror genre. Moreover, its opaque and, in some parts, incongruent approach to the postcolonial narrative is the result of disruptions in the internal structure of the language of cinematic horror, which was borrowed from its Gothic predecessors and superimposed on current affairs, namely the ongoing political oppression in Belarus.

Horror films made in or about Belarus bear a strong 'family resemblance'. They all rely on certain recurrent visual and narrative elements (horror tropes), which aspire to meet the audience's expectations of horror in the material and cultural conditions of Belarus during the last quarter of a century. Despite the commercial and political impossibility of the Belarusian horror genre (Herbert 2023), the list of horror media which have been studied by Western scholars and Belarusian scholars accepted in the West now includes at least five films, and this foundational corpus continues to grow both by discovering older horror films and by the studies of new ones. It is almost as if the Belarusian cinema refuses to die, in its undead state, despite the ongoing 'zombification' of the Belarusian film industry, which has been trying, with no creative or financial success whatsoever, to revive its Soviet legacy under Lukashenka's regime (Isakava 2014b; Khatkovskaya 2010; Kostiukevich 2020).

To start, the film *Dikaia okhota korolia Stakha / King Stakh's Wild Hunt* (Valeryi Rubinchyk, 1979, Soviet Union)[2] (further referred to as *Wild Hunt*) is the one and only 'original' Soviet Belarusian horror film based on the eponymous classical literary work of the Soviet Belarusian writer Uladzimir Karatkevich. While the genre of this film is usually categorised as a mystery thriller, especially in its first half, it eagerly lends itself to be interpreted as a horror film, to international audiences as well (e.g. Herbert 2023).

The next film in the national horror canon is the first independent Belarusian film of its kind, *Masakra* (Andrei Kudzinenka, 2010, Republic of Belarus), which consciously reinterprets the legacy of *Wild Hunt* (Isakava 2023; Rasinski 2011). *Masakra* further develops the aesthetics of Belarusian gothic to reinterpret *Lokis* (1869), a short, and rather orientalist, horror story by the French writer Prosper Mérimée. Another retelling of the same story, *Medvezh'ia svad'ba* / *The Marriage of the Bear* (Konstantin Eggert and Vladimir Gardin, 1925, Soviet Union) is sometimes mentioned as the first horror film in early Soviet Russia, even though the horror element in it has been significantly toned down. In one of the first studies on cinematic genres in the Russian language, *The Marriage of the Bear* is classified as a typical European drama (Piotrovskii 2001).

Finally, *Iatrinskaia ved'ma* / *The Witch from Yatryn* (Boris Shadurskii 1991, Republic of Belarus) is a lesser known Belarusian film produced in the last year of the Perestroika cinema that I add to the canon in this article. Like other films mentioned here, this film is constructed with the intention of sparking fear in viewers, and it implements some familiar horror tropes, as discussed below. Besides, the film reinvents almost exactly the same historical period that serves as the mythologised past in all versions of *King Stakh's Wild Hunt*.

Since the 2000s, independent art in Belarus has diminished to almost none, even though there is contemporary film production deep in the underground, unlike the relatively well promoted *Masakra*, which was produced at the state-owned production studio Belarusfilm. The new generation of Belarusian underground filmmaking seems to have moved beyond the initial canon, opening a new discussion about direct and indirect medialisation of violence that is normalised and carried on by the state. Among others, this canon has been recently extended with the experimental feature film *Sashin Ad / Sasha's Hell* (Nikita Lavretski, 2019, Republic of Belarus), and the Belarusian underground slasher *Spice Boyz* (2020) (Isakava 2023a, 2023b).

Moreover, the Belarusian horror film genre has influenced stage productions, namely, two different adaptations of *Wild Hunt* as experimental opera performances. The first version was written by Uladzimir Soltan (music) and Sviatlana Klimkovich (libretto) and premiered in 1989; it has since remained in the repertoire of the National Opera and Ballet of Belarus up until 2022 at least (Soltan 2021). The second version was created by the theatre directors Nicolai Khalezin and Natalia Kaliada, and the composer Olga Podgaiskaya; the libretto was written by the reputed Belarusian poet Andrei Khadanovich, who still attempted to retain as much of the source text as possible. This version of the opera was performed by the Belarus Free Theater in exile (Khalezin and Kaliada 2023). It premiered in Barbican, London, in September 2023, and is periodically streamed on the YouTube channel of the Belarus Free Theater. Even though both operas are textually based on the source novel, their visual means of expression are undoubtedly those of cinematic horror: the 1989 scenography relied on practical effects, which were augmented with digital media in 2021, and the 2023 adaptation prominently incorporates multimedia elements, especially in its streaming form.

Suppression and Resistance of the Colonised Culture

It remains a controversial topic whether the Soviet period in the history of the Republic of Belarus (1919-1991) should be considered a manifestation of colonial rule enforced by the Soviet Russian authorities in Moscow. Factually, Belarusians had no agency in questions of politics and, to a large extent, their own culture, throughout most of the Soviet era. Agency existed with strict limitations during the first decade of BSSR, as well as during the relatively liberal periods of Thaw and Perestroika in the USSR (see Astrouskaya and Liavitski 2020, Astrouskaya 2023). At all times, the politics of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union towards Belarus envisioned it as an artificially constructed and externally managed 'brother republic' within the Soviet empire (see e.g. Hirsch 2014). As a result, Belarusian language and culture were only allowed and promoted in censored and supervised forms sanctioned by the Communist Party, with its main decision makers in Moscow. These decisions were often made in concert with the Soviet colonial policy of gradual 'russification' in mind, implemented first and foremost in cultural production and education. Even the mildest forms of public resistance to this policy, such as publications and films about pre-Communist history of Belarus, only became possible after Stalin's death, during the Thaw.

In the meantime, Belarusian cinema, as the privileged 'art for the masses', remained in total control of the centralised Soviet state apparatus. The history of Belarusian national cinema began in 1924 with the establishment of Belgoskino, the Soviet Communist production and distribution studio initially headquartered in Saint Petersburg. Temporary ideological liberalisation resulted in the state-sponsored production of *Kastus' Kalinouski* (Vladimir Gardin 1928, Soviet Union), a film about the anti-Russian uprising on the territories of Belarus, Poland, Lithuania, and Ukraine in 1863-64, and one of its leaders, the Belarusian Konstanty Kalinowski (Belarusian name: Kastus Kalinoŭski). Alexander Huzhalouski describes this film as "the first attempt of a Marxist interpretation of national history on the Belarusian screen" (Huzhalouski 2011: 172). More films about (sometimes exaggerated) horrors of the Polish rule in Western Belarus were made (see Huzhalouski 2011), but since the 1930s, censorship and ideological control have curtailed public discussions of the historical heritage and cultural legacy of Belarus that went beyond its Soviet history.

Both the Thaw and Perestroika produced a wealth of literature on all genres in the Belarusian language. It was during the Thaw when Uladzimir Karatkevich, one of the most influential figures of the late Soviet Belarusian cultural renaissance, began his literary career. Throughout his early years, Karatkevich had been working on the novel *King Stakh's Wild Hunt* ([1964] 2012), which later became the canonical text for the national Belarusian horror genre. According to Karatkevich, *Wild Hunt* was conceived "at a barn" when he was nineteen (Maldzis 1990: 129). Karatkevich dedicated a lot of time to working on the novel in the 1950s, but it was only published in 1964, with many changes made due to internal and external censorship.

Events in the novel take place in the 1880s when the territory of Belarus was a dominion of the Russian Empire and was managed, often poorly, by the remains of local Belarusian nobility (shliakhta) who had agreed to submit to Russian rule. The important context to this story (which is rarely mentioned in the novel, as it would provoke Soviet censors) is that the local Belarusian nobility who did not agree to cooperate with Russian imperial rule joined the uprising of 1863-64 and later were either executed or sent to Siberia. Those who sympathised with the uprising were subjected to state repressions. In terms of narrative time, this happened only two decades ago, and the memory of these horrific events should still be alive in the local community of shliakhta, which is described in much detail. Still, this memory has been wiped out even from the consciousness of the main protagonist Andrei Belaretski, who only briefly mentions "the dreadful memory" of Mikhail Murav'ev (Karatkevich [1964] 2012: 7). Instead, for the main conflict of the novel Karatkevich turns to the much older history, employing the trope of intergenerational revenge sourced from Gothic and mystery novels. The following 'slippage', or transfer of the source of evil power from the Russian Empire onto the old Belarusian nobility, creates a structural ambiguity that persists in the later adaptations of *Wild Hunt* and lingers in other examples of Belarusian cinematic horror.

The legend of King Stakh tells the fictional story of folk rebels in 1602, allegedly based on unidentified folk tales that Karatkevich heard in the 1950s.[3] According to the legend, the landowner Stakh Horski from a noble family, consolidated the powers of serfs and local gentry to build a Belarusian kingdom of his own. This is the crucial point where the novel's symbolism becomes convoluted. King Stakh represents horror and violence in the novel and in the film, but in the fictional past, he was actually the good one, "the lawful King" (Karatkevich [1964] 2012: 63), "a Muzhyk king" who cared about ordinary people whose political will, language, and faith "are being trampled on" (Karatkevich [1964] 2012: 65). Stakh was killed by the traitor Raman Janoŭski, who conspired with the petty Polish shliakhta to claim Stakh's land, which can be read as an allusion to the Polish colonisation of Belarus. Now Nadzeia IAnouskaia, the heiress of Roman, bears his curse, expecting imminent death from the ghost of King Stakh. In terms of the narrative, *Wild Hunt* obviously reinterprets the gothic horror of Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1901-1902), which gave Soviet critics the grounds to accuse Karatkevich of plagiarism (Maldzis 1990).

A canonical example of a Belarusian horror film is found in the film adaptation of *King Stakh's Wild Hunt,* which was produced in 1979 and released in 1980. Rubinchyk collaborated directly with Karatkevich on the script, but the creative process spun out of control for many reasons, including a new cycle of film censorship. Some of the major changes are clearly motivated by the artistic vision of the director, as they are consistent with the fictional world of the film. Apart from the traditional Gothic attributes such as the horrific murder, the haunted mansion/castle, and the pale sickly maiden, similarities include the mysterious old portrait that resembles the suspect and even the ominous landscape. Notably, even the gloomy landscape of *Wild Hunt* looks similar to the one in the later Soviet TV adaptation of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (Igor Maslennikov 1981) – both were shot in lowland marshes enveloped in fog. For the purpose of this particular study, these tropes will be treated as structural elements that fulfil the expectations of readers for a particular genre, that is, Gothic horror. These easily recognisable elements invited to interpret *Wild Hunt* in such a way, starting from the very first reviews by Soviet film critics (see e.g. Kovalov 1981).

Additional expressive meaning put into these allegedly mostly formal elements of horror is supported by the fact that they were brought to the forefront of all later adaptations of *Wild Hunt* for screen and stage, which

elevated them beyond the tired cliches of Gothic horror in the eyes of the Belarusian audience. Such as, the ‘failed revolution’ in 2020 has actualised new interpretations of *Wild Hunt* in its stage forms, even Soltan’s version, which continued to run in the ideologically compliant National Opera. King Stakh’s curse, which is an irreplaceable aspect of all adaptations of the novel, sounds like a call for revolution, after the new wave of terror has flooded contemporary Belarus in blood after the ‘stolen’ elections in August 2020.

> You’ve betrayed your land, my former brother! But we shall not die. We’ll yet come to you and to your children, and to their heirs, my hunters and I. Unto the twelfth generation will we take revenge ruthlessly, nor shall you hide from us. You hear? Unto the twelfth generation! And each generation shall tremble with greater pain and more terribly than I now at your feet. (Karatkevich [1964] 2012: 66)

It remains unclear, however, whether King Stakh is supposed to represent Good or Evil in various versions of the story, despite the typical structure of the horror genre that assumes this dichotomy, so the audience can fear Evil and root for the protagonists. In fact, the appeal of *Wild Hunt* may be that it is open to both interpretations, due to the ‘slippage’ of meaning induced by the colonial and ideological pressures on Belarusians, which lead to the subject of fear being displaced. This peculiar structure of Belarusian horror is explained below.

Structural and Expressive Elements of Belarusian Horror

Film genre here is understood as functional, structural, and semiotic. Such an understanding emerges throughout Russian formalism bridging into poststructuralism in the conceptual field of Russian cultural studies (‘culturology’), developed in the works of Jurij Lotman (1976) and Yury Tynianov (2019). Yet another landmark of this conceptual journey is Mikhail Bakhtin’s linguistic theory of functional genres (2010). Within Bakhtin’s most general perspective on genres, the entirety of a complete linguistic ‘utterance’ is defined through its themes, composition, and style, and determined by its purpose, or function. A literary work is also a subclass of a linguistic ‘utterance’, according to Bakhtin, with the same structures and processes of genre formation. I argue that this theory can be extended to semiotic ‘utterances’ in other symbolic languages, such as cinema[4]. In a film of any particular genre, there are themes and stories to be told, compositional (structural) patterns, and expressive means identifiable within a particular style. Such elements are typical within certain classes, or genres, of cinematic utterances, at least, in so-called ‘genre films’. Most importantly, their application is determined by the general purpose of the entire film, such as, in the case of horror, to induce fear, dread, anguish, anxiety, terror, and other feelings and emotions of the same kind in the audience.

Even the most satisfying ‘genre films’ tend to be the most meaningful and interesting to researchers (and expert viewers, as well) in the parts where they deviate from the genre canon. Within Russian formalism and poststructuralism, this tendency can be conceptualised through the dichotomy of constructive and expressive means as presented in Yuri Tynianov’s work (Tynianov 2019): the ‘constructive’, or structural principle, which fulfils formal expectations, e.g. to a genre, in the dialectic unity with the unique expressive means that ‘deautomatise’ perception, in terms of his better-known colleague Viktor Shklovskii. The theoretical grounding for similar visual semiotics of film can be found in Jurij Lotman’s ‘brochure’ (in his own words) *Semiotics of Cinema*, first published in Tallinn, Estonia, in 1973, and translated into English in 1976. In this compact but influential book, Lotman characterises the visual language of the film as a bundle of differential signs, where each sign acquires its meaning through comparison to its antithesis (or absence of an alternative, as the ‘null sign’ in structural linguistics, e.g., Roman Jakobson, to whom Lotman periodically refers).

Lotman’s primarily poststructuralist analytical apparatus stands on the fundament of Russian Formalism, which was also one of the first theoretical assemblages in Europe to deal with the then-new art form of cinema. Lotman builds on dichotomies of form and content (same as Tynianov), ‘modus’ and ‘object’, ‘automatisation’ and clearly Shklovskian ‘deautomatisation’ of perception. Due to the limited volume of the

‘brochure’, Lotman only arrives at the notion of the film genre on its last pages: still, according to him, a film genre can be analysed as “a particular type of organisation of the artistic world having its own degree of conventionality and methods for organising meanings” (Lotman 1976: 92). At the higher level of considering the film as a work of art, its meaning is constructed by automatisation and de-automatisation of patterns in both form and content of the film: “both the fulfilment and the destruction of the expectations resulting from this situation create the opportunity for numerous artistic meanings” (ibid.). Below I approach the genre of Belarusian horror, and its ambiguous framing of colonial powers, through analysis of genre expectations, their fulfilment and destruction, at the level of the entire film (a cinematic utterance).

Belarusian Horror Media Through the Lens of the Horror Genre

In order to be perceived as such, Belarusian horror films rely on a varied set of tropes, selected rather deliberately from the global history of horror. On the one hand, these structural, or ‘constructive’ elements of horror are frequently subverted to create new expressive meanings: just like all other creators, makers of Belarusian horror rely on such liberty for their own artistic experiments, with an aspiration to scare their implied viewers in new and interesting ways. On the other hand, the purpose of these cinematic utterances at large allows us to separate the most critically acclaimed Soviet Belarusian film *Idi i smotri* / *Come and See* (Elem Klimov, 1985, Soviet Union) from the canon (even though the characters of *Sasha’s Hell* directly refer to it, see Isakava 2023). Although Klimov’s film excels at creating feelings of anguish and dread, it does not employ horror tropes structurally (that is, with the purpose of moving the narrative along in an expected way), neither is its main purpose to scare the audience – this is the side effect of a more complex discussion of ultimate evil as a part of the human condition, and what it takes to face it directly.

As explained above, the horror genre can be defined as a fluid and yet relatively stable set of visual and narrative tropes that constitutes a cinematic utterance (a film) constructed for the explicit primary purpose of inducing fear in its viewers. To do so, it implements a recognisable vocabulary of tropes (e.g. the haunted Gothic mansion or a castle, the poor orphan, the investigation of sudden death, the intergenerational urge for revenge, etc.) that are already expected by visually literate viewers, yet can be subverted to create new meanings and symbols. For instance, it can be the monster as the Other who defies colonisation (see Arata 1990 on Dracula), or personification of the country as ‘the final girl’, which I suggest here. Moreover, the functional purpose of a cinematic utterance makes it possible to bring together such different films as *Wild Hunt* (1979) and *Spice Boyz* (Uladzimir Zinkevich, 2020, Belarus) and put them in the context of global cinema in general. Finally, horror films rely on the shared cinematic vocabulary of expressive means beyond their typical narrative structures, such as slow motion and menacing soundscapes in *Wild Hunt* (Herbert 2023).

As a local subgenre, Belarusian horror so far has always situated itself in a characteristic native context. There are always figures and tropes in place to signify their Belarusian locality and the circumstances (but never the main narrative) point at the implicit desire of liberation from the violent regimes of power. For example, the motif of revenge for events in the past, the stereotypical motivation in many horror films, takes up new meanings in the Belarusian context, when the historical circumstances of the story are defined by colonial dependence from the Russian (and sometimes Polish) oppressors. Both *Wild Hunt* and *Masakra*, for example, provide space for questioning the hegemonic relationship between Belarus and Russia (but also, in the historical past, Poland (Isakava 2014)), even when this relationship cannot be discussed openly due to implicit and explicit censorship. Even *Masakra*, which was produced in the relatively ‘vegetarian’ period before the fourth Belarusian presidential elections in 2010, is so wary of its own postcolonial impetus, that the only place where its characters can openly rebel is Italy. At least, this is how its friendly critics (e.g. Rasinski 2011) interpreted a very brief closing scene when one of the minor characters joins Garibaldi’s uprisings in immigration.

In what seems to be an attempt to place itself in the context of European cinema, *Masakra* reinterprets the story of Dracula (Isakava 2014, Rasinski 2011), directly referencing *Nosferatu* (Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, 1922, Germany)). This reference in *Masakra* does not go further than non-reflective mimicry: “[...] This allusion is not resolved or anchored in understanding that German Expressionist imagery in a Belarusian film from 2010 is out of place if it is taken seriously” (Isakava 2014: 129). This mimicry, however, may be conditioned by the very structure of the story, which is inherently the story of resistance to imperialism. As Arata demonstrates on the example of Bram Stoker’s Dracula (1897) and his native Transylvania, the role of Eastern Europe in the Western imaginaries of horror cinema has been shaped by the colonial imagination of imperialist states in the context of late Victorian novels.[5] *Lokis*, the Merimee story that inspired *Masakra* and *The Marriage of the Bear*, is the prime example of such exoticisation. The repatriation of Lokis[6] to Belarusian territory can be compared to ‘reverse colonisation’ performed by Count Dracula when he settles in the British Empire (Arata 1990): the monstrous Count emerges as the fearful Other in the Empire, but the horrifying truth is that the Empire has brought it onto itself by its inhumane expansionist politics. A more recent, although less artistically convincing example of ‘exotic Eastern Europe’ can be found in the horror film *Hostel* (Eli Roth, 2005, USA and Czech Republic), which likely informed the Belarusian survival horror of *Spice Boyz* (2020) (see e.g. Lowenstein 2023).

Another Belarusian horror film is rarely (if ever) mentioned in critical and academic discussions, although its kinship to the genre is made clear from the very first scene. *The Witch from Yatryn* (1991) is a historical horror drama that, in some aspects of the genre, resembles the contemporary American film *The Witch* (Robert Eggers, 2015, USA and Canada). Same as in *The Witch* (and in *Wild Hunt*’s romanticised historical past), the story is based on historical records from the seventeenth century, although the art direction of the film aims for mystery rather than historical accuracy. Beautiful and smart Raina Hramyka and her loving husband, the Orthodox priest Father Martin, travel from town to town in the Belarusian territory of the Great Duchy of Lithuania in futile attempts to escape allegations of witchcraft. Raina is a healer, who has a deep knowledge of herbal medicine as well as spiritual powers. Her beauty enchants the young noble Korsak and his father, the local voivode (which in this context means the head of local administration), but she rejects them both. Raina is thrown in prison but eventually escapes from the fire due to the efforts of her former patients, one of whom dies for her. Among other elements of horror, *The Witch from Yatryn* features realistic depictions of torture, the morally ambiguous witch, supernatural forces that come in contact with the characters, and even ‘the final girl’ who eventually escapes the horror.

Directed by Boris Shadurskii, *The Witch from Yatryn* was produced by the combined resources of Belarusfilm and the independent studio ARTE during the most tumultuous year in the history of Belarusian cinema (see Khatkouskaya 2010). Despite his Russian origins, Shadurskii was not a complete stranger to Belarusian culture: at the very beginning of his career, he co-directed the short film *Krasnyĭ agat / Red Jade* (Sergey Nilov, Aleksandr Pologov, Boris Shadurskii 1973, BSSR), based on a script written by Uladzimir Karatkevich himself, as a part of his graduation project (on which see Kostiukovich 2021). The opening scene of *The Witch from Yatryn* acknowledges the legacy of Belarusian horror: it shows the dark interior of the old castle, the ghost of a small person at the tomb of a mediaeval knight, and the gallery of portraits of old Belarusian nobility, one of whom, as we will soon learn, is the true villain of the story. However puzzling this scene may seem at first view, when placed into the context of Belarusian horror, it clearly pays homage to the most recognisable elements of the film adaptation of *Wild Hunt* (1979). At least, there is no direct internal motivation in *The Witch from Yatryn* for the ghost to be a small person, and the destroyed portrait plays no direct role in the main narrative, which points at their intertextual origin, or, at least, a conscious nod to *Wild Hunt*, where both of these are important parts of the story.

The Gothic Heroine / the ‘Final Girl’

In *Wild Hunt*, the canonical text of Belarusian horror, the narrative is set into motion by the intergenerational curse motivated by betrayal of King Stakh by his bosom friend Raman Janoŭski. The innocent receiver of this curse in the twelfth generation, Nadzeia IAnouskaia, is the last descendant of the Janoŭski noble family. Her wan and enervated character fits almost entirely into the Gothic trope of “a young impressionable woman, who lives alone in a Gothic mansion” (Isakava 2014: 120), waiting to be liberated from the fearful past by external forces. In the film version, we first see Nadzeia’s face in a spot of light at the far end of the long table in the candlelit Gothic dining room. Her guest Andrėĭ is seated on the opposite end of this gigantic table, and yet, we hear them converse in a relatively casual manner, even though a side shot demonstrates that there is a distance of at least ten metres between them. This is one example of many, where experiments with filmic sound and space create an eerie atmosphere and the feeling of anxiety, as if something was terribly wrong about the castle, and Nadzeia herself. Later they are shown being seated face to face on the sides of the same table, as trust between them is supposed to grow stronger with time.

Notably, Nadzeia demonstrates more agency in the film than she does in the source novel. The latter concludes with the happy ending typical of Gothic novels: the Gothic heroine marries her rescuer, and they live happily ever after (Ellis 2012: 458). The afterword briefly mentions more challenges than the protagonists experience almost twenty years after the events described in the novel: “Everywhere life was kind to us, even in Siberia where I found myself in 1902. She was more than just a wife to me – she was a friend until death” (Karatkevich [1964] 2012: 291). Rubinchyk makes the artistic choice to bring this afterword on screen: in order to do so, he moves the filmic time twenty years later, so the film ends on January 1, 1901: Belaretski is sent to Siberia by the tsarist Russian administration for ‘insurrection’, and Nadzeia actively chooses to follow the man who promised to liberate her, even though she does not have to do so.[7] In the final scene, she is shown looking at Andrei with admiration, while he blankly stares at the scenery from the window of the police carriage. The ghosts of the past have finally left her at peace, but he has not made sense yet of the past, let alone the future, signified by his fellow passenger Ryhor’s remark about “the first day of the twentieth century”.

It is worth noting that the trope of a pale Gothic maiden implicitly suggests agency and liberation already in its initial historical form: “The task of the classic Gothic heroine is to escape from the castle that has become her prison, to preside over its demystification, a process that usually requires its violent destruction, and to claim the fortune and lineage that the villain has sought to make his own” (Ellis 2012: 463). Even the poor mental state of the heroine can be positively reinterpreted in previous feminist reading of Gothic novels: the ‘crazy woman’ was the one who had agency, who could travel, and have romantic adventures of her own (Ellis 2012, Thelandersson 2023). This reading is supported by the unlikely double of Nadzeia: her aunt, pani Kulsha, who takes up a much more prominent role in Rubinchyk’s adaptation.

In the novel, Aunt Kulsha is a crazy old lady eager to help Andrei Belaretski, who looks at her with a mix of sympathy and disgust. In the film, Aunt Kulsha is much younger, and her mental illness is reimagined in a poetic, decadent sense, as opposed to the novel where her misery was described in disgusting detail. With no internal motivation in either the novel or the film, she is portrayed as a fine fin-de-siècle lady by Rubinchyk, traversing the cursed marshes while wearing the latest fashion with a lot of pizazz. Due to her extravagant appearance, pani Kulsha was featured on some film posters instead of Nadzeia. Besides, she becomes a narrative double for Nadzeia in the culmination of the film, completely reinvented by Rubinchyk. The filmic Kulsha steals the seventeenth century dress that Dubatoŭk gifted to Nadzeia, which serves as an implicit code for Belarusian independence during the period of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Dressed as a nobility, she rushes towards the Wild Hunt, shouting at them ‘Murderers!’ Her courage is punished with execution on the spot, – but, at least, she did not remain silent.

This artistic choice is structurally motivated: in order to raise the stakes in the climax of a horror film, the monster (here represented by the Wild Hunt) needs to chase someone; in the meantime, the fragile Nadzeia has always avoided the marches, and probably would not last for long. Perhaps accidentally, pani Kulsha

becomes another embodiment of Belarus, as a strong, modern liberated woman who also embraces her history and owns her alleged ‘craziness’. Moreover, her looks in the film are distinctly Western European, which can also be perceived as quiet resistance to Russian colonial politics and an affinity for the West – especially in the 1980s, when the image of the West in Soviet cinema was still frequently aligned with evil (see e.g. Fedorov 2017).

Produced during a very brief period of political freedom, *The Witch from Yatryn* is generally an outlier in Belarusian horror, although it also provides a clear-cut metaphor for Stalinist terror, as we will see below. In other regards, this film sets up its own unique story, with occasional Gothic tropes such as the haunted castle, and the character of a poor orphan, who is also a symbolic reincarnation of her untimely deceased mother Raina, the titular witch from Yatryn. Raina is probably one of the strongest main female characters in Belarusian genre cinema, at least story-wise. Raina is a brave, smart, stunningly beautiful and highly educated woman ahead of her time, who is constantly perceived as either a sexual object or a threat by most men around her. This also allows the director to include a shot of Raina running naked in the meadows (as witches obviously do), but her character develops through many demonstrations of her wisdom and strength, especially as a response to unwanted advances and even rape attempts.

Somewhat in contrast to the romantic tropes of genre cinema, Raina is happily married to the Orthodox priest Father Martin, who deeply appreciates her as a person and highly values both her beauty and her wisdom. Raina’s ability to care about people and heal the sick eventually allows her to escape death by burning at the stake, as another woman steps in her place in a selfless act of female solidarity. It would be an exaggeration to label Raina ‘the final girl’ of this mediaeval horror, but she definitely follows the same path of liberation through fight. Most importantly, her daughter lives on even after Raina is gone, and she inherits the name, the beauty, and, as shown implicitly in the introductory scene, the independent character of her mother. This also creates contrast to the trope of a Gothic orphan: this brave and beautiful ‘final girl’ has lost her mother, likely, soon after she was born, and her father even before that. In this way, *The Witch from Yatryn* creates a structural antithesis to the Gothic heroine analysed above.

Finally, the leading female character in *Masakra* is structurally closer to ‘the final girl’ than to the Victorian rebel. Count Pazurkievich’s fiancee, the insatiable vixen Anna with whom he is in love, is from a Polish noble family: in the Russian classical literature, of which the film’s protagonist is such a fan, she could be compared to the seductive Polish adventuress Marina Mniszech in Aleksandr Pushkin’s play *Boris Godunov* (1825). Beyond sexual liberation, Anna’s character does not get enough opportunities to develop in the rather convoluted story; she is shown, however, hanging out with a bear (her ex-mother-in-law?) at Count’s premises in one of the visually memorable last scenes of *Masakra*. Her deeply perplexed, somewhat still terrified, and yet relieved expression at the end of the film highlights her kinship to ‘the final girl’ who has just survived a massacre.

The Tourist / the ‘Mimic Man’

Both in *Wild Hunt* and *Masakra*, the story is set into motion through a very popular horror trope, which was also borrowed from Gothic literary horror (see Arata) is the motif of a Western (or otherwise marked as ‘civilised’) traveller who goes to remote borderlands towards looming menace and potential demise. A creatively successful contemporary implementation of this trope can be found, for example, in the critically acclaimed *Midsommar* (Ari Aster, 2019, United States, Sweden). As it has been discussed already in Isakava 2022, *King Stakh’s Wild Hunt* (1979) inherits the ‘lost traveller’ trope from its literary source, which was likely inspired by British literature.

In *Wild Hunt*, the male protagonist Andrei Belaretski is often shown lost and disoriented, in an outsider position in relation to all other characters. In the source novel, Belaretski is a young Belarusian man from

‘lesser gentry’ who has spent his formative years in Saint Petersburg where his parents likely migrated after the uprisings of 1830-31 (November Uprising) and 1862-3 (January Uprising). After finishing his higher education, he returns to the land of his forefathers as an ethnographer, in order to learn more about his country and preserve its cultural heritage, especially of the oppressed peasants. On the surface, Belaretski’s role in all versions of *Wild Hunt* fits the Gothic narrative in its patriarchal form. When we first meet Nadzeia IAnouskaia both in the novel and in its later adaptation for screen, she is in an extremely vulnerable state, seemingly conveniently placed in peril for Belaretski to prove himself as a man and as a patriot. His role, however, deserves an interpretation that goes beyond the surface of the patriarchal myth, and this process is initiated in Rubinchyk’s *Wild Hunt*.

In the film adaptation, the character of Belaretski has no former history – at least, it is not expressed in the film by any material means. He spends the first part of the film wandering aimlessly around the castle, wide-eyed and passively soaking in the stories that the inhabitants of the Ianouski estate tell him. The camera frequently frames Belaretski from below, as he stands at the top of the stairs in the castle, while all local characters stand below him (see Fig. 1). Quite often, especially in the first part of the film, they turn their faces upwards to speak to him, as if he was symbolically above them all.

Belaretski is introduced to the local shliakhta. Stills from *King Stakh's Wild Hunt* (1979, Vakeryi Rubinchyk).

The claims that Andrei must be a noble hero of a special breed come from his secret antagonist and the monster of the horror narrative, Hryń Dubatoŭk; they might as well be interpreted as Dubatoŭk's cunning

attempts at manipulating the young stranger for his own means. Although Belaretski expresses kinship with Belarus in the literary source, he is so alienated and detached from his surroundings in the film that Herbert interprets him as "literally an alien" (Herbert 2023: 39). Although not contesting Herbert's interpretation of Belaretski as an embodiment of Belarusian national intelligentsia, I offer another interpretation based on his position in the structure of the colonial power: that of a "mimic man", developed by Homi Bhabha.

A "mimic man" (Bhabha 1984: 128) is produced by the Imperial imagination through its (Western) educational system; such "mimic man" is then placed as an intermediary between the Western administration and the colonised masses. Mimicry, therefore, represents "an *ironic* compromise" (Bhabha 1984: 126) between the Empire and the Other. Reacting to Benedict Anderson's book *Imagined Communities*, Bhabba characterises "the mimic" as "the effect of a flawed colonial mimesis, in which to be Anglicised, is *emphatically* not to be English" (Bhabha 1984: 128) . Here we can find a parallel to Soviet national policy towards Belarus (as well as other national Soviet Republics): such emphatic recognition of Belarus as a nation that could only exist within the Soviet Empire also denied it any kind of cultural or political sovereignty – the type of problematic "partial presence" described by Bhabba. This at least a century-old problem returned with the Russian-Ukrainian war and de facto Russian control over sovereignty of Belarus.

Eventually, the role of Belaretski as a "mimic man" in the film is revealed during his visit to the local administration and the police station – yet another scene completely reinvented by Rubinchyk. Here Rubinchyk stresses the position of Belaretski as an ethnographer,[8] employed by the Russian Empire, sent to investigate the forsaken mysteries of its cultural dominion. In fact, the only place where Belaretski is granted the comfort of communal belonging is the local police station with the portrait of the Russian tsar on the wall. Here Andrei meets the principal investigator, employed by the colonial rule of imperial Russia: unlike his book prototype, the investigator is an agreeable, soft spoken man of culture who immediately recognises Belaretski as someone of the same class. "You are so lucky to have me!" – he exclaims, and from his words we learn that Andrei is an official member of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society. Furthermore, Belaretski admits – and we have no reason to doubt his sincerity in this particular scene – that he has nothing against tsarist rule, and that he would like to appeal to the imperial Russian administration for further investigation of the case of Wild Hunt. The investigator strongly advises him against it, hinting at connections at the higher level, and warns that the imperial Russian administration considers Andrei politically unreliable. This encounter reveals Belaretski's status of a "mimic man", recognised by the colonial authorities, and yet 'never fully Russian'.

Only in the second part of the film, which is also where the most horrific scenes take place, Belaretski's face begins to express emotions other than naive astonishment. Horror first appears on his face when he finds Nadzeia in the flooded cellar, dressed as the Blue Woman; he starts acting and speaking with courage and determination only after he witnesses the killing of his friend Svetsilovich, which is shown on screen. The silence that accompanies this spectacular horrific death is reminiscent of the use of sound in the classic *Come and See*. Still, Belaretski's character remains within genre expectations of a 'tourist', the stranger who has entered the cursed hinterland and now must fight the monster. In an intertextual twist, he sees his own character acting in this exact role in the folk theatre at Dubatoŭk's house. Moreover, there is no reason for Dubatoŭk to treat this milquetoast young man as a dangerous opponent: the only reason for him to perceive Andrei as a threat is metatextual, and structural. It is almost as if Dubatoŭk knows that he is the monster of this story, and expects the stranger from the big city to dethrone him, precisely as it has been predicted in the local legends that Dubatoŭk knows so well.

However artistically vague, Rubinchyk's creative choices express deep, and in itself horrifying, ambiguity of the opposition between 'the civilisers' and 'the civilised'. Such ambiguity is generally lost in *Masakra*. Here, the trope of the tourist is embodied in its most typical form in the character of Nikolai Kazantsev, a very annoying, unsympathetic, and stupid Russian adventurer who is framed as the protagonist of the story for the reasons that can only be explained as structural, e.g. genre expectations of such 'tourist' in a horror film about

the hinterlands of the Empire. In the cinematic language of horror, both the Russian Nikolai and the Polish Anna represent the intruders in the land of the Belarusian Other, destined to be killed by its supernatural forces whom they have bothered. In this context, the resolution of the main conflict in the narrative in favour of the Russian protagonist is confusing, to say the least. The narrative, however, subverts this expectation: the Russian trickster kills the Belarusian werebear count with no future repercussions, following the structure of a typical Dracula narrative.

Finally, *The Witch from Yatryn* does not include the stereotypical ‘tourist’: it was made during the very short period of independence, and the power structure depicted in it is not based on colonial rule. The film depicts a recognisable type of monstrous power, as we will see below, but it avoids social critique altogether, and its characters speak about personal responsibility instead. The postcolonial angle is still implicitly present in the film’s locations, as it showcases several objects of cultural heritage of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, such as the restored Trakai castle, and the ruins of a palace shot in the Belarusian Ruzhany (this palace was partially restored later in the post-Soviet times). Besides, in the final scene, the ghost of the little man visits a mournful and seemingly haunted place that looks like a forest made of crosses (see Fig. 2). This famous location is the Hill of Crosses in the Siauliai district of Lithuania, which has served specifically as the site of quiet resistance to Russian colonial authorities throughout the nineteenth century as well as during the Soviet regime. The use of this location might be purely expressive in the film, adding to its gloomy atmosphere, but its meaning is out there to be uncovered by a curious viewer.

Stills from *The Witch from Yatryn* (Boris Shadurskii, 1991). In the final scene, the first shot features the Small Man, shot in Ruzhany, Belarus; the second one shows the Hill of Crosses in Lithuania.

The Monster / the Reappropriator

The monster figure is one of the most important structural elements of horror genres (see, e.g., Carroll 2003). In the most basic structure of a horror narrative, the monster represents the ultimate evil force, whom protagonists try to escape or fight. Moreover, subversion of this trope is not uncommon since the earliest examples of horror media (e.g., the ambiguity of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde). The specifics of Belarusian horror, shaped by Belarusian history, is that the monster often bears at least some marks of its uniquely Belarusian origin, which creates additional structural ambiguity in the ethical alignment of its protagonists.

King Stakh's Wild Hunt is the first and the most pronounced example of this tendency. On the surface level, the evil forces are represented by the titular Wild Hunt, a mysterious collective supernatural force that destroys the Good in people's souls, as Nadzeia explains to Belaretski in a passionate scene where he falls in love with her. Unlike the literary source, where the Wild Hunt usually appears at night, we see it twice in its full glory: first in the fog over the marshes, and secondly in the middle of a blizzard. As it is revealed in Belaretski's conversation with local children, the Wild Hunt somehow takes the land from Belarusian peasants, although this is not explained further. Of course, the Russian imperial authorities could have moved the locals from their ancestral lands (which they only recently obtained legal rights to own or rent, by the way, as they had been in serfdom for generations before). All we know, as an audience, is that the parents of local children have perished because of the faceless Evil; any explanation to it is lost to either the metaphorical fog of the narrative or Soviet censorship. As the same children quietly see Belaretski off in the finale, we are left to believe that they had hopes for him to destroy the Evil; however, although the villains of the story are dead now, locals' lives seem to have only changed for the worse, if at all, after yet another beheaded uprisal. It appears that forced demystification of the Wild Hunt did nothing to reveal the true face of Evil, that is, the colonial power. Instead, the narrative of the film in particular leads Belaretski to reveal the human face of the monster, Dubatoŭk, who is allegedly 'the real' King Stakh.

The film version makes an extra effort to justify the evil nature of King Stakh by introducing the story within a story (same as in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*) – the play presented by vagabond puppeteers. In this play, King Stakh is evil, because he wants to marry the daughter of Raman Janoŭski (also Nadzeia's father's name). This does not connect to the rest of the narrative: strictly speaking, Dubatoŭk cannot marry Nadzeia, because he is her distant relative and legal guardian, although it is implied both in the book and in the film that this would not be against the customs of the local shliakhta. Finally, there are much more efficient ways to make a sickly teenage girl disappear, especially if she lives alone in the middle of deadly marshes.

Should we read the Wild Hunt as a class critique aimed at the old shliahhta? Based on memoirs of his friends, Karatkevich deeply admired old Belarusian culture in its entirety, including aristocratic heritage and religious forms (see e.g. Maldzis 1990). Isakava rightfully points out that class critique was an obligatory element in any Soviet anticolonial narrative (Isakava 2023a: 136). I will add to that that it was also a structural, constructive element of any Soviet fictional genre, as opposed to expressive, that is, artistically meaningful, parts of the narrative. Moreover, the absence of class critique (the null sign) would be perceived as anti-Soviet, which would negatively impact the Soviet writer's career and sometimes livelihood (see e.g. Astrouskaya 2023, Herbert 2023), and Karatkevich was well aware of that. As a counterpoint, Rubinchyk's film seems to secretly admire the shliakhta, even the nobility's dance, which expresses 'degeneracy' in both operas, is choreographed in a stiff wooden manner in the film, implying unfreedom and manipulation rather than 'organic' degeneracy, in the words of other characters.

The reason why Dubatoŭk sees himself as the modern King Stakh remains unclear in the film, but it can be explained through genre expectations. Structurally, Dubatoŭk is the Dracula of this story: a representative of the old nobility who hides in the shadows until the final reveal. The evil nature of Dubatoŭk becomes ambiguous through the postcolonial lens of Arata: he is also the renowned bearer of the exotic customs of

Eastern Europe, not afraid to use the rules and power structures of the Empire for his own benefit (it is implied in the film that whoever had staged the Wild Hunt has connections at the tsarist administration).

Dubatoŭk is consistently characterised by his respect for old customs, and knowledge of the old Belarusian cultural heritage. Moreover, in Rubinchyk's adaptation, Dubatoŭk's deception is revealed by use of the Belarusian language in the discovered letter ('luben'ki' - 'my beloved'). The Belarusian language, therefore, becomes the mark of evil in the narrative of the first Belarusian horror film. The same can be observed in *Masakra,* which postulates the question of colonial oppression in Belarus through the use of languages (Isakava 2014: 131). The characters of the film speak three languages, all of which can be understood by its intended Belarusian audience: Russian, Polish, and Belarusian. The latter is reserved for the locals, the were-bears, and the main monster of the story, Count Pazurkevich; all these characters function as the menacing Others who oppose the Russian protagonist destined to fight the monster.

Being a relative outlier, *The Witch of Yatryn* does not follow any particular genre conventions in its depictions of evil. The horror that it depicts in raw and psychologically intense ways has its roots in particular people, such as the local governor, the noble Vaivode Korsak, and the inquisitor and executioners whom he employs. His advisor Filip (a character that is symmetrical to Wild Hunt's Varona) is presented as a force of evil, yet capable of good deeds (Raina is saved from execution with his assistance). To induce terror, *The Witch of Yatryn* appeals to the primordial fear of extreme pain and mutilation, especially in the last third of the film that includes several intense scenes of torture. The horrific nature of unjust punishment is contrasted by its impartial administration by the state employees completely devoid of empathy, and the failure of the juridical system, manifested in the character of the compliant Judge (who even refers to himself as a "small person", incapable to withstand Vaivode Korsak). The Belarusian context that is unfortunately even more relevant today reveals itself through dialogues of Vaivoide Korsak and his execution 'office' with the victims and their closest ones: the dry scornful tone and the logical justifications of extreme violence provided by the representatives of power resemble the typical manner of speech of Soviet authorities and investigators, especially those employed by the KGB.

For example, when Father Martin arrives at the castle in search for his wife Raina, the executioners at the prison react to his questions in the following way:

> The executioner who imprisoned Raina: Are you sure she was taken away?
> Father Martin: I did not see it myself, but people…
> The executioner (with contempt): Those people… [...] Yes, you understood it correctly. You can go.

Such dialogues refer to the characteristic style of communication professionally adopted to the KGB officers in the USSR as well as in Lukashenka's Belarus today. Evil, therefore, resides in the state administration, represented by specific people who make such moral choices in a fully conscious, intellectual manner. In fact, supernatural powers oppose these forms of evil, such as the ghost of a small person, who haunts Vaivode Korsak and reminds him of death and punishment in the afterlife, if it exists. The complex nature of the monster in this horror film demonstrates its ambitions as a philosophical drama in the manner of *Det sjunde inseglet / The Seventh Seal* (Ingmar Bergman, 1957, Sweden), even though intense horrific scenes still dominate over philosophical dialogues in *The Witch from Yatryn*.

Conclusion: *Wild Hunt*'s Comeback in 2023

The characteristic postcolonial ambiguity of Belarusian horror is that, at least, in its first generation, violent forces of evil are represented by particularly vivid images which, in a different context, would signify Belarusian national culture. Such seemingly illogical representations of dark forces include the Wild Hunt

itself, the ancient werebear magic in *Masakra*, and even the mediaeval uneducated masses in *The Witch from Yatryn* who eventually kill the supporting male protagonist Father Martin.

As soon as we start examining the story beyond its horror tropes, we realise that King Stakh was a nationally conscious representative of Belarusian nobility who treated local peasants well; the monstrous Count in Masakra speaks Belarusian and comes from an ancient local family. In postcolonial terms, Belarus as a subaltern is not allowed to speak for itself: both *King Stakh's Wild Hunt* and *The Witch from Yatryn* are shot in the Russian language, with Belarusian words added only occasionally for the orientalist purpose of creating 'local colour'. In contrast, the protagonists, who usually come from elsewhere, aim to destroy the local powers who have always been present in the lands that they now visit temporarily. This, once again, reflects the ongoing and yet incomplete realisation of the (post)colonial situation in Belarus. Alexander Herbert notices it, as well, in his analysis of *Wild Hunt*: "Fear of repression went a long way in taming expressions of national trauma and ethnic terror, but it could not stop people from referring passively to those things in their art" (Herbert 2023: 43).

This 'slippage' of the oppressed cinematic language has been conditioned by the ambiguous status of Belarusian national intelligentsia, who had to occupy the position of a "mimic man" in order to access higher education, do creative work, or even survive. Such a position is not unique to Belarus: Arata points at the fact that Bram Stoker himself was ethnically Irish, even though he was employed by the British empire, which demanded political compliance from him. This is not too dissimilar from the position of Uladzimir Karatkevich, a successful Soviet writer who secured his career through strategic connections in Moscow (see Maldzis 1990). Still, Bhabha finds implicit subversive potential, "a gaze of otherness" (Bhabha 1984: 129), in the diminished figure of a "mimic man". For Belarusians in particular, the traumatic process of understanding one's place in the many peripeteias of contemporary history has called for the imaginaries and tropes of horror. From this perspective, passionately aestheticized representations of dark forces may serve as subversive continuation of political mimicry: the Monster who stares back, the Other who reappropriates what was his, and more.

In 2023, this process brought to life yet another adaptation of the first Belarusian horror story to multimedia stage, the multimedia opera *King Stakh's Wild Hunt* (2023). It was produced by Belarus Free Theater, premiered at Barbican, London, on September 14-16, 2023, and has been streamed to Belarusian viewers worldwide on several occasions. In narrative terms, the 2023 version of Wild Hunt may be opaque and confusing to an audience unfamiliar with its literary source (and even to those who have not had the pleasure of studying it word for word for an extended period of time). *Wild Hunt* (2023) still enjoyed an enthusiastic response from Belarusians in exile, delivering the core story of misplaced fear under oppression in the most expressive, horrifying form. For example, the videos used in the performance were made in the style of digital found footage now frequently used for small scale internet horror productions.

The new form of a multimedia opera allowed for more poetic and expressive visual language that did not necessarily follow conventions of realism, nor did it adhere strictly to the plot. The Wild Hunt itself – the faceless Evil – was represented by two characters wearing masks that resemble the skulls of Irish elk. This is the continuation of the aesthetics of Rubinchyk's *Wild Hunt* (1979), which also possibly inspired the artistic direction of Soltan's opera version (1989): none of the horrifying participants of the Wild Hunt had heads of dead animals on their shoulders in the source novel. In *Wild Hunt* (2023), these masked figures also appear in the scenes that only imply the presence of the same people who participate in the Wild Hunt; such as, they serve as seconds at the duel between Belaretski and Varona. This development fleshes out the ethical ambiguity of omnipresent Evil, which can reside in anyone's soul: such as, the same masked characters forcefully take the Little Man to a mental asylum in *Wild Hunt* (2023), although this was Belaretski's infamous deed in the source novel. Finally, the Wild Hunt occasionally wears leather jackets, which is an obvious visual reference to the KGB, the ultimate real life horror of both Soviet and Lukashenka's Belarus.

Other elements of the story, however, are presented in a more straightforward manner: Nadzeia remains within the confines of the Gothic heroine trope, and Belaretski is framed as the honourable representative of the Belarusian national intelligentsia (especially in the opening scene, when he is dressed accordingly), following the most common interpretation of this character (see Herbert 2023), and the ambiguity of his position as a ‘civiliser’ is not expressed.

Stills from *King Stakh’s Wild Hunt* (Nicolai Khalesin and Natalia Kaliada, 2023), the streamed version of the multimedia opera. The first scene introduces Belaretski as ‘intelligentsia’. He is the narrator of the horror story that happened to him in his youth: “I will tell you how a stupid young man almost died in a terrible horror.” Courtesy of Belarus Free Theater.

In general, the re-use of tropes and structures enables perception and interpretation of this multimedia opera as the continuation of the Belarusian horror genre, and invites the audience to perceive it as liberation by horror. Like its predecessors in cinema and on stage, *Wild Hunt* (2023) signifies the need of the Belarusian

audience to delve into the difficult question of nationality, identity, and state violence in the form of a horrific spectacle.

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Notes

[1] The director always uses this transliteration of their name.

[2] The film is in Russian.

[3] This legend cannot be connected to any particular episode of the actual history, although some contemporary commentators have suggested the noble Mikhail Hlinski (1460-1530), who rebelled against the Grand Duke of Lithuania and eventually switched sides and joined the forces of the Muscovite Prince Vasilii III of Russia.

[4] Bakhtin himself invites such interpretation by proclaiming the 'general linguistic' nature of his theory, where the 'totality of language' is presented in the context of structural semiotics, whose explanatory ambitions went far beyond human language.

[5] In the contemporary development of Eastern Europe as the locus of horror, *Infinity Pool* (Brandon Cronenberg, 2022, Canada, Croatia, and Hungary) sends its stereotypically unsympathetic American tourists to torture in a technologically advanced totalitarian republic that bears visual clues of late Socialism (such as the giant public pool in a decrepit state as the ultimate location of horror).

[6] In fact, the story of Lokis could actually refer to Belarus, as the name Litva (the Slavic analog to 'Lithuania', or 'Lietuva' in Lithuanian) has been historically used to denote ethnically Belarusian lands.

[7] In today's context, this choice mirrors the real life stories of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaia and Veranika Tsapkalo, who embarked on their political careers in support of their imprisoned husbands.

[8] One of the characters who dies a terrible death in *Midsommar* (2019) is also an ethnographer, who sees the local rituals as a means of advancing his own career.

Bio

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