Editorial

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Is the current boom in horror movies a mirror of our times? Recent commentary appears to suggest so. A Guardian editorial published earlier this month observes that "all horror movies are a reflection of their time, and ours are pretty scary." Writing for *Prospect*, James Oliver declared "the time of the superhero is over" and notices a correlation between "horrible times and horrible movies." As geopolitical and economic conditions worsen, the argument goes, the superhero franchise that dominated the last decades, today yields horror films. While the story is neat on paper, the first golden age of Hollywood horror, ushered in by Universal's *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*, both released in 1931, unfolded in the same decade that pulp magazines were filling with superhero figures. Captain Marvel, Batman, and Superman were all created before the 1930s ended. Victor Fleming's hugely popular *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* came out in 1941, the same year that Wonder Woman made her first appearance in *All Star Comics #8*. In the shadow of the Great Depression and the rise of totalitarianism, fantasies of invincible guardians and nightmares of cursed bodies developed side by side.

While the superheroes of the 1930s and 1940s did have superpowers, they lacked the kind of aristocratic grandeur bestowed on them by Christopher Nolan or the Russo brothers. Theirs was essentially a modest world. They lived on cheap paper in cramped panels sold at newsstands and drugstores, and were encountered in clandestine circulation: swapped in schoolyards, hidden from parents, passed from hand to hand until the covers fell off. Part of their charm came from this marginalized status. They were fantasies of power for those who had little. To make sense of today's move away from the superhero genre and turn toward horror, it may be useful to understand its historical roots in Romantic heroism and imperial ambition to see how it compares to our own.

The early nineteenth century was an age of aggressive imperial expansion. European influence spread across the globe, fueled by industrial power and a burgeoning sense of superiority. Civilizational confidence, to use Jennifer Pitts' term, found its literary expression in the Romantic hero. Like Clark Kent, they strode across distant landscapes and cultures, and while not flying at the speed

of light in a red cape, still lived up to the attire. Byron's Conrad (*The Corsair*, 1814), for example, can be found in corslet and cloak and on a flying vessel. The world appeared open to their will, a space for exploration and the imposition of order. In William Wordsworth's *The Excursion* (1814), his character "The Wanderer" envisions Albion (Britain) civilizing the globe, claiming that "Earth's universal frame shall feel the effect" of British expansion. He portrayed the British as possessing the "power," "will," and "instincts" to "cast off / Her swarms" and establish new communities on distant shores. In France, readers could conquer the New World through René, the hero in François-René de Chateaubriand's eponymous novella (1802) who traverses the American wilderness, transforming the terrifying frontier into a sublime backdrop for the assertion of his own European consciousness. While Germany arrived late to the scramble for overseas territory, civilizational confidence found an expression in Richard Wagner's Pantheon of Germanic heroes, most notably Siegfried, who shatters the old laws to forge a unified national consciousness. The Romantic hero, needless to say, was not a cheerleader of imperialist capitalism. He moved through landscapes loaded with broken arches, toppled columns, and half-buried monuments. Ruins were meant to reflect his own sense of standing at the edge of fading worlds; while civilizations tumbled, the lone wanderer prevailed.

The end of the 19th century saw things collapse into a long depression. Free-trade liberalism gave way to defensive protectionism and the rise of monopoly capitalism, as nations scrambled to shield their markets from volatile global forces. Politically, the dominance of Great Britain was eroded by the ascent of rival powers, especially the United States, which transformed the "open" world of Chateaubriand, Wordsworth, and Coleridge into a claustrophobic theater of competitive anxiety. The stability of the metropolitan centers was fractured from within by the rise of mass democracy and labor movements, which challenged the bourgeois order that had underwritten the imperial mission. Simultaneously, the periphery began to strike back; growing unrest in the colonies – from the Indian Mutiny to rebellions in the Caribbean – exposed the limits of European control and fueled domestic fears that the empire was overstretched and vulnerable. The "undiscovered lands" (Shelly, *Alastor*, 1816) the Romanticists conjured were not only "gone," as the historian Frederick Jackson Turner remarked about the American frontier in 1893; they turned into a source of threatening competition and uncontrollable resistance. Perhaps the world was never empty to begin with, only claimed that way until those who lived in its periphery forced themselves back into view. In 1899, the year the United States pressed its claim to an overseas empire in the Philippines and waged a war that cost hundreds of thousands of Filipino lives, Joseph Conrad wrote in *Heart of Darkness*, "The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it."

Perhaps no literary genre reflected this fin-de-siècle malaise more vividly than

late Gothic fiction. The narrative focus turned inward as writers fixated on the invasion of the homeland fearing a form of reverse colonization; that the conquerors would become the conquered and the periphery strike back at the metropole. In Bram Stoker's *Dracula* the threat is a Count from Transylvania penetrating the heart of London. He brings with him a literal infection, threatening the purity of English bodies. And so, the cursed body, the decaying estate, and the porous border replaced the melancholic explorer in the cultural imagination. Famous Gothic classics like Richard Marsh's *The Beetle* (1897), Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) turn London into a haunted capital where political crisis and racial panic lurk beneath its polished surface. Where the Romantic hero roamed broken temples set into seemingly endless landscapes, his Gothic heir meets the world from inside a box meant for the dead.

One way, then, to understand today's shift from the super-hero franchise to the rediscovery of horror, is to understand the political and economic transformations that accompany each genre. The late twentieth century and the dawn of the 21st, marked an era of hyper-globalization, of integrating markets and the frictionless movement of capital. In the early 2000s, globalization boosters at the World Bank celebrated the export surge in East Asia and the rapid poverty declines in China, Vietnam, and India. They pointed to farmers-turned-factory-workers, software engineers selling services abroad, and migrants whose wages multiplied the moment they crossed a border. Reports from the period treated rising integration as a highway out of rural isolation for billions, a promise that markets, once opened, would widen the world and expand its possibilities. Superheroes are the perfect avatars for this vision of a globalized economy. They gain their power by absorbing techniques, secrets, and resources from "the periphery" and then returning to the metropole as its protectors. The Shadow learns his abilities from India, Egypt, and China; Mandrake the Magician gains his powers from Tibet; Iron Fist trains in the Kunlun mountains; Batman is shaped by Himalayan tutelage, and so on and so forth. Distant cultures are reservoirs of power that the hero appropriates to stabilize the center. In short, the world is open, and its sources come towards us as a field of solvable problems, ready for expert intervention and the benefit of all.

It is not hard to see how the "civilizational confidence" that Jennifer Pitts identified as fueling European imperial expansion finds its modern counterpart in the moral and technological certainty of the globalization project. Where the Romantic hero asserted European consciousness onto the American wilderness or the Orient, the superhero asserts a globalized order onto regions of "instability." Particularly relevant for this journal in this regard is Sokovia, a fictional Eastern European state introduced in the Marvel Cinematic Universe with *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014). The country sits amid remains of post-Soviet ruin: emptied squares, damaged housing blocks, and a

government unable to control the forces tearing at its borders. Note that there is no cold-war villain to vanquish anymore. Instead, there is Ultron, an artificial intelligence created by Tony Stark, aka Iron Man, himself meant to protect the planet, now gone rogue in Sokovia's capital from where it is orchestrating mass extinction. Of course, the Avengers succeed in re-establishing order, but there is also a melancholic side to their quest. As unbridled technocapitalism infiltrates the planet, it is bound to transform and more often than not destroy the "old." The post-Soviet setting of Sokovia provides a perfect stage for this sadness. A transformation even the mighty Avengers cannot fix: every victory arrives too late for the worlds already lost. The superheroes' real powers, then, may not be their superhuman abilities, but their persistence on keeping a coherent self in worlds that keep breaking apart. In Tony Stark's "Because if we can't protect the Earth, you can be damn well sure we'll avenge it" resounds Childe Harold's "I have not loved the world, nor the world me; / I have not flatter'd its rank breath, nor bow'd / To its idolatries a patient knee," a last affirmation of self against a corrupt, perhaps doomed world. It is in this sense that the superheroes of the last decades are essentially Romantic.

At least since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the era of hyperglobalization and, with it, the fantasy of a seamless world, has come to an end. Trump's tariffs, the surge in military expenditure, and a witch hunt on "illegal" migrants, all pull against the superhero's frictionless globe. The cultural mood has similarly darkened, fixating on the invasion of the homeland and the fragility of the center. Of the hundred [highest-grossing horror films](#) of all time, almost one third are from the last five years. The horror blockbuster, like Zach Cregger's *Barbarian* (2022) and *Weapons* (2025), Ryan Coogler's *Sinners* (2025), and *The Conjuring: Last Rites* (dir. Michael Chaves, 2025), crowds the genre with images of a homeland rotting from within its own institutions, families, or neighbors. Take the story of Detroit, which provides the setting of *Barbarian* (although the film was shot in [Bulgaria](#)). After the subprime crisis of 2007/2008 and the city's 2013 bankruptcy, Detroit lost thousands of owner-occupied homes to tax foreclosure, saw mortgage lending dry up, and incomes stagnate. Meanwhile, rents have [nearly doubled](#) since the crisis, as outside investors and short-term rental platforms targeted cheap properties and reshuffled the home ownership structure. In *Barbarian*, the haunted house is a rented Airbnb in a deserted Detroit block. The booking system places property in global circulation while the neighborhood around it shows the strain of years of foreclosure and ownership loss. In other words, the hidden basement in which the film's horrors unfold is but a symptom of an expropriated community that once would have seen, heard, or intervened.

If the superhero is a mass-cultural survival of the Byronic hero that lets subaltern subjects identify themselves with imperial power, horror exposes the decay that same system produces at home. It is in the seeming stability of domestic space that the fantasy of planetary protection curdles into a collective angst that no cavalry arrives, which is why the scream so often starts

in the living room. In short, what these films register is the other side of the globalization story. Hyperglobalization did lift incomes in many places, but it has also widened inequalities, thinned out industrial regions, and left whole regions feeling expendable. It accelerated the extraction of natural resources and carbon burning, tightened planetary interdependence in ways that spread financial and health risks, and strained public institutions. In that sense the current horror boom is less an escape from the superhero era than its negative image.

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In this month's issue, Martin Kudláč shares his thoughts about *Perla* by Alexandra Makarová, which reapproaches the East-West divide from a female perspective. Anna Batori scratches her head about Alexandros Voulgaris' clumsy attempt at being edgy in *They Come Out of Margo*. Jack Page reports from the BFI London Film Festival and the Black Nights Film Festival with reviews of *Orphan* – another historical drama by László Nemes – and Mantas Verbiejus' comic *Sand in Your Hair* about living and aching at an advanced age. Finally, Antonis Lagarias discusses *Her Will Be Done*, in which female desire morphs into a supernatural and destructive force.

We hope you enjoy our reads.
Konstanty Kuzma & Moritz Pfeifer
Editors

Note: Due to delays in our publication schedule, this issue was published in the month of November 2025.