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PHASES OF THE MOON: A CULTURAL HISTORY OF THE WEREWOLF FILM (2020) BY CRAIG IAN MANN

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Arguably, the 'big three' in the contemporary Horror monster market are zombies, vampires, and Victor Frankenstein's creature. A mummy occasionally makes an appearance, perhaps a ghost. But cinematic werewolves have been – until recently – relegated to 'B' or even 'C' list monster status, especially in terms of the attention they have received in critical scholarship. Sheffield Hallam University's Craig Ian Mann's book aims to address that deficiency. It comes on the heels of other scholars and their books sharing the same goal and just as a plethora of new werewolf films are also being released.

Until recently, the landscape of popular culture werewolf monographs was rather bare. Prior to 2020, there was really only the excellent *She-Wolf* (2015) edited by Hannah Priest which focused a feminist lens on werewolf literature and film and Chantal Bourgault du Coudray's *The Curse of the Werewolf* (2006). Bourgault Du Coudray's work explored psychological interpretations of the werewolf myth in a number of different popular forms, including film, as well as literature, governmental insignias, and graphic novels. James Gracey's *The Company of Wolves* (2017) restricted its focus to film – but only the single film of its title. And Kimberley McMahan-Coleman and Roslyn Weaver's *Werewolves and Other Shapeshifters in Popular Culture* (2012) drew upon recent contemporary case studies of werewolf tropes in various media.

Within the last two years, the werewolf popular culture studies scene has exploded. Mann's work came into print. It was quickly followed by *In the Company of Wolves* (2020) – collecting essays which examined werewolves as cultural symbols in multiple contexts including eighteenth century debates about wild children, folk tales, and film – and *Gender and Werewolf Cinema* (2020) by Jason Barr. Barr's book unpacked the masculinity of werewolves in twentieth century films and the emerging femininity of twenty-first century werewolf cinema. Then, released in 2021, *Werewolf: The Architecture of Lunacy, Shapeshifting, and Material Metamorphosis*, a collection of essays edited by Caroline O'Donnell and José Ibarra, attempted to address the intersections of werewolf mutability and several emerging architectural theories.

Onto this stage, Mann's *Phases of the Moon* (2020) monograph stands alone in training a cultural analysis spotlight on the scope of werewolf cinematic appearances in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries – all the way from the lost film *The Werewolf* (1913) through *Wildling* (2018). (It necessarily omits newer films like *The Wolf of Snow Hollow* (2020), *Eight for Silver* (2021), and *Bloodthirsty* (2021)). Mann's is an encyclopaedic undertaking, an ambition he acknowledges when describing his intent to construct "the broadest cultural history for the werewolf film possible within the confines of a single monograph" (215).

Comprehensive surveys like this one either result in an unusable weighty tome or a condensed work with breezier summaries of less interesting films. This work is of the latter variety. Thus, we have a readable summary which occasionally devotes only a thumbnail sketch to some entries. Still, if it skimps a bit here and there, it succeeds in grouping films into eight thematic categories, arranged more or less chronologically, as a means to summarise the common motifs and cultural angles which emerge, generate, then fade, over time.

Mann – like Carys Crossen's *The Nature of the Beast* (2020) (yet another recent entry in the field, but one which studied popular fiction werewolves) – rejects the simplistic cultural assessment of werewolves as manifesting division-of-self or 'beast within' metaphors. The full cultural range of werewolves, Mann proves, is magnitudes richer than merely this trope. Beginning with a grouping of xenophobic werewolf films, he demonstrates that the shape-shifting lupine monster is more than simply a Dr. Jekyll with fur. The werewolf is often politicised, occasionally contradictory, and invariably a product of its times. Not all of this critical work is original with Mann, and he acknowledges and sources prior scholarship quite frequently.

Mann begins by explaining how the first werewolf films used "the werewolf as a xenophobic metaphor to demonize those alien to the white United States" (13). The first two recorded werewolf films (both now lost), *The Werewolf* (1913) and *The White Wolf* (1914) appropriated Native American mythologies of skin walkers and presented indigenous cultures as shocking, foreign, and threatening. The first surviving werewolf film, *Wolfblood* (1925) repeated this treatment, not with overtly Native American elements, but Mann emphasises, with "a clear reference to Native American totems" (17).

With America's entrance into global conflict of World War Two in 1941, "vilifying the country's own minorities in popular culture quickly became counterproductive, likely to drive America's people – and its armed forces – further apart at a time when they needed to be unified" (27). And so, the antagonists flipped to external threat malefactors (specifically, traceable to Romani 'gypsy' camps). Xenophobia of Native cultures gave way to xenophobia of foreign cultures while the werewolf themselves became sympathetic, especially as immortalised by Lon Chaney Jr.'s portrayals of Lawrence Talbot (*exempli gratia*, *The Wolf Man* (1941)). Talbot's unwitting transformation into a reluctant killer paralleled the experiences of many young men drafted into the armed services, engendering still greater empathies. Meanwhile, a related grouping of werewolf films, Mann explains, posited "werewolfism as a hereditary and normally European curse" (39).

Despite the strong forces of national unification in the 1940s, however, not all werewolf films cooperated with messaging which supported the war effort. *The Mad Monster* (1942) demonstrated an unease with technology and the misuse of science. Its protagonist was an Allied powers scientist – and a patriotic one at that – who attempted to fashion weaponised werewolf super-soldiers by means of wolf blood transfusions. The vilification of unrestrained scientific advancements continued into the 1950s with films like *The Werewolf* (1956) which featured an atomic werewolf.

A fresh pack of werewolf films was introduced, Mann continues, with *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* (1957). In these films, the werewolf stood for the country's latest moral panic – juvenile delinquency. Out of these themes grew a related strand of werewolf films which concerned themselves with the horror of counterculture movements such as *Werewolves on Wheels* (1971). Werewolves as hippies aligned themselves with society's seeming out of control trajectory. Out of the country's ideological crisis emerged films with much more subversive themes of social collapse and the failure of authority. With *The Boy Who Cried Werewolf* (1973), werewolves even attacked the nuclear family.

Mann next introduces the reader to werewolf films of the 1980s, which began to speak to a new cultural fear – that of disease and infection occasioned by the AIDS crisis. The 'body horror' films of David Cronenberg and werewolf movies like *The Howling* (1981) revealed a fear of the frailty of one's flesh – and an anxiety of how to control it. Werewolves in this period became much more lupine (thanks in part to advancements in special effects) and much less human. Lycanthropy, it is emphasised in films like *An American Werewolf in London* (1981), is something you can catch. It spread via infection in *Monster Dog* (1984) and erupted out of sexuality in *The Company of Wolves* (1984) where wolves burst forth from men's mouths in the act of coitus.

It is with Mann's dissection of werewolf films spawned out of the Reagan-Bush years and the 'New Right' movement in American politics that his scalpel becomes unsteady. He reads a rather large number of films as reactions to fiscal conservatism, restricted rights to abortion, tax reform, deregulation, and religious morals. At times, he seems rather preoccupied with the conservatism (which he clearly opposes) and its failures (which he highlights). Still, he makes some astute points. His analysis of the community horror text of *Silver Bullet* (1983) is convincing. His assessment of the anti-establishment message of *Howling IV* (1988) is equally instructive. And his examination of the lampooning of traditional gender roles in *My Mom's a Werewolf* (1989) is quite compelling.

Finally, after surveying the many gender-identity-themed werewolf films of the 1990s and 2000s – like *Wolf* (1994), *Ginger Snaps* (2000), and *Wilding* (2018) – Mann turns to a cluster of class-conscious underdog films like *Howl* (2015) in which werewolves attack a stranded British commuter train's passengers. The passengers in *Howl* are divided by economic status; an underpaid transit worker protagonist must put a rich football player in his place. Initially, it seems, the 'other' of the vicious pack of fanged antagonists are simply monsters. But upon closer examination, it seems, these werewolves actually occupy the lowest rung on the social hierarchy. One werewolf, the passengers notice, wears a wedding ring. The werewolves are not back-and-forth shapeshifters. Rather, they

have been irrevocably transformed into nonverbal pariahs. The werewolves are the indigent – and just plain hungry. Mann notes: “They function, then, as a particularly potent metaphor for austerity’s victims: those who have found themselves unemployed, destitute, homeless or dependent on food banks as a direct result of cuts to public spending – and those who have died as a direct result of government policy” (203-204).

Even as recently as less than ten years ago, a reasonable person could legitimately wonder, like Craig Anderson did in the pages of *Fangoria* magazine, if the werewolf’s limitations had rendered it “simply not all that salient anymore?” (74). No credible lupine scholar would ask that question today. Werewolves are everywhere and aggressively shapeshifting into previously unimagined morphologies. They are being endlessly restyled and repurposed. Their flexibility, Mann demonstrates, is quite remarkable. Perhaps it is the metamorphosing potential of werewolves which underlies the astounding variety of different cultural possibilities mapped in Mann’s book. *Phases of the Moon* merits a place on any bookshelf alongside other leading cultural history Horror studies like *Zombies: A Cultural History* (2015) and *Our Vampires, Ourselves* (1995). Indeed, it is indispensable.

WORKS CITED

Anderson, Craig. “Where are the wolves?” *Fangoria*, no. 329, 2014.

BIONOTE

Thomas E. Simmons is a tenured professor at the Knudson School of Law in Vermillion, South Dakota, USA. His research, course offerings, and scholarship concern trusts and estates, with occasional forays into popular culture and film. He is a regular contributor to AllHorror.com. His collection of biographical horror poems, *Tod Browning Loose-Leaf Encyclopedia*, was published in 2020 by Cyberwit.