



## Genre en séries

Cinéma, télévision, médias

3 | 2016

Dynamique des études de genre appliquées aux objets médiatiques. Retour sur le congrès de l'Institut du Genre 2014

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### Tim SNELSON, *Phantom Ladies : Hollywood Horror and the Home Front*

New Brunswick, NJ : Rutgers up, 2014, 224 pages

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#### Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ges/2331>

DOI: 10.4000/ges.2331

ISSN: 2431-6563

#### Publisher

Presses universitaires de Bordeaux

#### Printed version

Date of publication: 1 January 2016

Number of pages: 213-217

#### Electronic reference

Loïc Lerme, "Tim SNELSON, *Phantom Ladies : Hollywood Horror and the Home Front*", *Genre en séries* [Online], 3 | 2016, Online since 07 February 2022, connection on 10 February 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ges/2331> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ges.2331>

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TIM SNELSON, *PHANTOM LADIES : HOLLYWOOD  
HORROR AND THE HOME FRONT.*

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PAGES

Loïc LERME

At the crossroads between women's studies, media history, and monster theory, Tim Snelson's *Phantom Ladies : Hollywood Horror and the Home Front* examines the changes that occurred in Hollywood's film production during World War II. Spotlighting a significant shift in the gendering of the spectatorship—men were in Europe fighting against the Axis—Snelson offers his readership a compelling and thorough study of the cultural mutations American cinema underwent on and off screen. While challenging the traditional view that women were too sensitive to enjoy watching horror movies at the time, Snelson unearths a circular « politics of tastes » (p. 2). As a matter of fact, the new American female workers of the 1940s found in the horror movies of the era « new and invigorating ways » (p. 163) to reflect on their socio-professional situation and their bodies. Accordingly, studios endeavored, one after the other, to mirror these women's experiences through movies revolving around (profitable) female monsters. Exploring the meanders of this simultaneously exhilarating and anxiety-inducing liberation, the author articulately deciphers the stakes of the artistic transposition of the wartime home-front ladies onto the cinematic screen.

Snelson dedicates the bulk of his first chapter to the innovative « female Gothic » and monster movie, *Cat People* (1942), produced by Val Lewton for RKO Pictures, one of the giants of the Hollywood Golden Age, and directed by Jacques Tourneur. At this stage, the author brings out the main traits that will characterize the rest of the female monster film cycle : a relocation of the horror narrative to contemporary urban America, a triangular sexual dynamic (two women vying for the romantic attention of one man), and a heroine situated at the crossroads of victimhood and monstrosity. For Snelson, this specific ambiguity of the female protagonist resonates with the complexities of women's lives on the home front : Irena, a

Serbian immigrant doomed through her matriarchal lineage to metamorphose into a panther when sexually aroused, fails to combine feminine nurturing domesticity toward her husband with her boundless sexual instincts. In order to avoid clawing the one she loves to death, Irena commits suicide abandoning her body to a panther in a zoo. The shape-shifting monster, a sympathetic female protagonist despite everything, embodies the « inability to reconcile the traditional expectations and contemporary demands of society » (p. 33) on the « new » American female who had to be desirable yet, strong and productive at the same time. In this project of media historicization, Snelson explains how the economic success of *Cat People*, together with the past triumph of Universal monster movies such as Tod Browning's *Dracula* and James Whale's *Frankenstein* in 1931, inspired other studios (except for Warner Bros), like Producers Releasing Corporation (PRC) or Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, to embark on the monstrous adventure.

In chapter 2, the author follows the assimilation of Lewton's model by these studios and expatiates more deeply on the factors that led the female monster films to constitute gradually a full-fledged distinct Hollywood cycle – namely, the audience's thirst for that specific kind of horror and a sharp decline in grosses for romances and war-themed movies. Emphasizing the influence of Freudian psychoanalysis, Snelson sheds light on the ambivalent attitude towards the female body. In *Captive Wild Woman*, released by Universal in 1943 and directed by Edward Dmytryk, a mad scientist steals a female ape, Cheela, from a circus and injects the gorilla with human sex hormones. The operation results in the animal taking on human form and succumbing for her former trainer's charms. The sultry woman that Cheela – now called Paula – has become re-integrates the circus under a new identity but evinces aggressiveness toward her rival, Beth, and accidentally kills another woman. She, however, ends up reverting to gorilla form and dies while impeding a lion from mauling Fred, the trainer. The excess of sexuality located in the female monstrous (hybrid) body brings about mayhem, thereby fostering fascination for and fear of this body's sexual appetite. While Paula, the new star of the circus dies, Beth, a demure secretary, marries Fred. The movie, therefore, seems to sanction the essentialist discourse of the time that

biology should dictate proper feminine role, in other words, in the social context of the war, female bodies should not perform factory manual work.

Even though the new central roles allocated to actresses in horror – traditionally a male prerogative – could be regarded as progressive, echoing the female spectators' increasing professional and social opportunities such as going to the movies unescorted, the feminine monstrous desire could also refer to an « infectious and emasculating threat to America's war effort » (p. 73). Indeed, in *Son of Dracula* (1943), Robert Siodmak's first film directed for Universal, Katherine invites Hungarian Count Alucard, Dracula's son, to New Orleans, Louisiana. Soon afterward, Katherine's father passes away and « Kay » marries her gloomy visitor. She later confesses that she only wedded Alucard to secure immortality and pass it on to her former fiancé, thereby exposing her nation to foreign, European invasion, the Count, and to the vampiric phenomenon associated with venereal diseases (through penetration, exchange of body fluids and physical transformation). Snelson reminds us, yet again, of how intertwined the social context and the media production were, convincingly relating the stigma attached to women's bodies in movies, such as *Son of Dracula* (1943), to conferences held by the American Social Hygiene Association on female promiscuity, or rather what was then termed « female sexual delinquency ». While female sexual freedom came to be considered a noxious distortion of patriotism, female monsters in cinema, with the impending closure of the war, were berated as dangerous counterhegemonic entities (the focus of chapter 3).

At the time, America witnessed a revival of spiritual and psychic practices (the use of ouija boards, séances, hypnotism to name but a few) ascribed to the uncertainties of women awaiting the return of their male relatives. In keeping with this social phenomenon, Hollywood launched into the production of « classy » horror movies, blending seriousness and the supernatural. As a matter of fact, at the same time, movies purporting to belong to the horror genre, such as *Phantom Lady* (1944) directed by Siodmak again, relegated the figure of the female monster to the realm of psychology and psychiatry. The elusive eponymous « phantom lady », who could provide the perfect alibi to one of the male characters charged with the murder of his wife (strangled with one of his ties), in fact, suffers from depression and is

psychologically impaired. The character is displaced from society due to her attachment to more traditional gendered values and her stay-at-home attitude, thus symbolically threatening the war effort made by her off-screen counterparts. Although some female characters of the mid-1940s, like Lettie, the femme fatale in Siodmak's *The Strange Affair of Uncle Harry* (1945), were often depicted as « monsters » or « creatures », their monstrosities usually resided in their mental disorders – hypochondria in this case. As the craze for « physical » female monsters in Hollywood was waning, so was the active role of women in society : men were coming back from the war, reclaiming their hegemony, and reassigning the « central productive roles of housekeeping and childbirth » (p. 131) to women.

In chapter 4, the author discusses the confirmation of this trend in film production and the postwar « secularization » of the female monster movie cycle, that is to say the complete erasure of supernatural elements in the storylines. Due to a series of box-office fiascos, and under the impulse of censorship that deemed monstrous women too aggressive, Universal put an end to its female monster franchises and was soon followed by RKO. Only a few low-budget quickies belonging to the cycle, produced by Poverty Row – a collection of B movie studios in Hollywood – kept coming out, and even then most of the movies underwent some secularization.

Targeting an audience that was now accustomed to wartime atrocities and bloodshed, « psychiatric » pictures (p. 148) gradually replaced the previous horror movies, offering a remedy to female horror and monstrosity. *The Dark Mirror* (1946), another collaboration between Siodmak and Universal, exemplifies the new trend by picturing two identical twin sisters, one of whom is accused of killing a doctor. Owing to a lack of cooperation from the twins and the domination of one sister over the other, the police remain at a loss to determine the exact identity of the murderess. Fortunately, a specialist in twin births steps in and releases the twin from her sister's grip, thereby safeguarding an innocent while exposing a criminal. Quite clearly, the new wave of what had become film noir represented the female « hero » as well as female subjectivity, as a threat to be eradicated by a post-war « he-man » or therapist, thus shoring up the redeeming image of psychiatry. The female monstrous body turned into a Freudian id – our double as the spectator can

literally see in *The Dark Mirror* – under the scrutiny of the pseudo-scientific and medical male gaze, indicating nostalgia for the pre-war essentialist gender roles. Wartime women were now regarded as suppressing their true mothering and nurturing instincts in favor of masculine traits, such as initiative, resilience, intellectual stamina, or even physical strength. Consequently, the guilty twin sister in *The Dark Mirror* was no longer the incompetent frail woman, redolent of the prewar period, but the « smart » one.

Although some readers might deem certain arguments somewhat repetitive, Snelson's *Phantom Ladies : Hollywood Horror and the Home Front* offers a critical analysis of movies excluded by most of the contemporary horror scholarship. Drawing on psychoanalysis, film studies, and sometimes literary theory (such as Tzvetan Todorov), the richness of his arguments can only urge the modern spectators to re-evaluate today's film production and scrutinize the origins of their own tastes – Snelson notes, for instance, modern horror fans' frustration to the dearth of strong female monsters and the so-called progress the insertion of the latter in today's horror movies would be. Establishing connections between the different studios of the time (RKO, Universal, Columbia, MGM etc.), the book restores the far too often distorted genealogy of the emblematic monstrous characters that still haunt our movie theaters, and will certainly become essential reading for any media scholar interested in horror films and female monsters in general. What was thought to be a mere cog in the horror movie machine might actually turn out to be the cornerstone of our modern fascination for monsters, so tempting is it to let oneself be seduced by these « phantom ladies ».

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