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## Fear of the Other: Antisemitism and its Effect on the Horror Genre

Wes Luka

Horror films reflect the fears of their creators. Some of the first examples of the genre come out of Germany before the Second World War, a time where antisemitism was widespread. It may seem like Germany only became hostile for the Jewish people when Adolf Hitler was appointed chancellor in 1933, but antisemitism was very much present before this time (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum). Many German filmmakers pre-Nazi Germany used the fear of the other to create movie monsters that are now classics in the horror genre, such as the Golem and Nosferatu. How Jewish representation in horror films has changed since the last century from antisemitic movie monsters to horror movies more respectfully based on Jewish folklore, is an important shift when it comes to the role Jewish representation plays in the continuation of the horror movie genre.

To understand what the Golem and Nosferatu mean in terms of Jewish horror, one would need to look at the happenings of pre-Nazi Germany. During the early twentieth century and after the First World War, antisemitism started to see an increase. “Consequently, Jews were disliked and feared for their religious beliefs and attitudes, their so-called racial characteristics, perceived economic behavior and power, and their assumed leadership or support of subversive political and social movements” (Brustein and King 4). The separation of Jewish people into ghettos came long before the rise of Hitler and Nazism, with Venice being cited as the first location to use the term *ghetto*. First self-separated, ghettos quickly became less of a choice for the early twentieth century Jewish people and more of a requirement (Schwartz).

There are many theories for why the Jewish people were believed to be blamed for the hardships of post-World War One countries. Scholars cannot exactly agree upon one known cause, but many boil down to a few specific points. A war-torn Germany needed a scapegoat to blame for their loss during World War One and historically there was no better marginalized group when it came to blaming an entire country's misfortune than the Jewish people (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum). There was nothing the Jewish people did in particular that led to them being discriminated against. The Jewish people simply had different cultural practices and beliefs than the rest of Eastern Europe, which fueled the fire of antisemitism that had previously laid dormant in the hearts of Germany's non-Jewish residents.

The rise of antisemitism coincided with the creation of some of the first known feature-length horror films. Among the up-and-coming creators of the time was Henrik Galeen. In 1915, Galeen released a film he co-wrote, co-directed, and starred in called *The Golem*. Unfortunately, most of this film is now lost to time. In what limited footage remains of the 1915 lost film, Galeen's talent of creating monsters is evident. "He was drawn to all kinds of monsters. People who are in between identities, people who want to be something else. This social position of someone who wants to get in but is recognized as 'other' was very attractive to Jewish filmmakers. His monsters were not so monstrous" (Grisar 2). The creation of the Golem on the silver screen was a huge landmark in monster horror flicks. Though the idea of creating monsters was already present, from the original Jewish golem myths to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Galeen was one of the first to truly translate the incredible man-made horror into a visual format for audiences.

Despite the loss of the original 1915 film, its 1920 prequel, *The Golem: How He Came into the World*, lives on. Once again co-written by Galeen, it creates the origin story for the

Jewish people's protector-turned-threat. The tale of Jewish people being discriminated against was extremely real at the time of the film's creation. Galeen, an Austrian Jewish man living in Germany, very accurately depicted the Jewish struggle through the writing of both films as the struggle of the Jewish people post-World War I could certainly be related to that of the Jewish community of characters in the film. Cast from their homes into designated neighborhoods and looked down upon by the rest of Eastern Europe and Christian society, Rabbi Loew and the rest of the film's cast were going through exactly what Galeen himself was. Was there finally a film for the German public to educate and reassure them that the Jewish people were not the enemies they were often made out to be? Perhaps, not quite.

Despite Galeen's Jewish heritage, the films are far from kosher. Galeen may have co-written the films and had insight into the Jewish psyche of the time, but that does not mean his fellow writer, director, and actor Paul Wegener did. Wegener worked with Galeen on both of the Golem films and could very well be the reason for the antisemitic undertones in an otherwise well-informed depiction of the Jewish struggle. At first, *The Golem: How He Came into the World* can be perceived as a film praising the Jewish citizens of Germany. However, closer inspection will show that this is simply not the case.

It is arguable whether or not the Jewish citizens are indeed the villains in the film. On one hand, the Christian Emperor has declared that the Jewish people are guilty of committing various crimes, including practicing black magic. It is obvious that that claim is true, as Rabbi Loew brings the Golem to life by summoning the spirit of Astaroth. With only this to go on, how is the audience supposed to root for Rabbi Loew and his community? The Jewish people walk around dressed as secretive magicians in pointed hats and now they have crafted a

monstrous being to destroy the innocent Christians! One could see how this would paint the once-believed protagonists in a bad light.

One scene in particular is a perfect example of the rampant antisemitism present in the film. The Golem goes on a rampage after the Rabbi's servant brings the Golem back to life to seek revenge on the character Florian for being in love with Miriam. The Golem kills Florian, kidnaps Miriam, burns down homes, and even breaks down the ghetto doors before being stopped by an Aryan child playing in front of the doors. This completely erases any hope of the Jewish people being the protagonists in this film, as it seemingly proves to the German people of 1920 that, if left unchecked, the Jewish community will destroy society as they know it.

Even if the antisemitism in *The Golem: How He Came into the World* is not completely evident during a first-time watching, viewers most certainly did not miss the derogatory undertones of the 1922 film *Nosferatu*. F. W. Murnau's vampire film was the first feature-length horror film with a blood-sucker as the antagonist and was also written by Henrik Galeen. Despite the team of a Jewish screenwriter and rumored homosexual director (Welter), this film once again played into the stereotypes of minorities in Germany.

Why is *Nosferatu* so antisemitic in nature? Murnau was not thought to be antisemitic (in fact, his lover, poet Hans Ehrenbaum-Degele, was half Jewish) (Grisar) and Galeen certainly was not. However, one look at Max Schreck's portrayal of *Nosferatu* and it is evident there is antisemitic undertones to his appearance.

“So who or what is *Nosferatu*'s ancient, tremendously powerful creature, a sort of humanoid rodent given an imposing hooked nose, who communicates with his minions in a mysterious code, which includes several Hebrew letters as well as the Star of David, and, contaminating every space he occupies, arrives out of the

East with a swarm of plague-bearing rats to feast on the blood of naïve Aryans until destroyed through an act of Christian sacrifice by a virtuous woman? The vampire recalls two monstrous slanders against European Jews, evoking both the blood libel and the accusation of poisoning wells to spread disease that resulted in widespread pogroms and the near-extermination of Jews throughout the Rhineland in the mid-14th century” (Hoberman 3).

In fact, the comparison between Jewish people and Nosferatu was so strong, it may have inevitably caused Nazis to compare Jewish people to vampires just a handful of years down the road.

It was bound to happen in the evolution of the horror genre. The fear of the other that overcame the citizens of Germany was presented on screens for all to see and translated into various monsters and ghouls. That is what horror was invented for, after all. Despite Jewish writers, like Henrik Galeen, many of the first horror films were used to spread antisemitism across Eastern Europe and make way for Nazism. Even films like *The Golem: How He Came into the World*, that at first glance may seem culturally sensitive, are riddled with discrimination and hate. The comparison of the Jewish people to vampires in *Nosferatu* is just another example of this. Hatred and fear are what make up the horror genre, that much is true. However, what could have been films depicting the Jewish struggle with Post-World War One inevitably cemented antisemitic ideology in the minds of the German people and paved the way to the rise of Fascism and Nazism in the East. Despite the best efforts of writers such as Galeen, there was seemingly no way to stop what was about to come.

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