

# Fear, Russian Style: What's Wrong With Russian Horror?

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Volume 6, Number 1, June 2023

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1101397ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1101397ar>

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## Publisher(s)

Montréal Monstrum Society

## ISSN

2561-5629 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

## Cite this document

Sokolov, D. (2023). Fear, Russian Style: What's Wrong With Russian Horror? *Monstrum*, 6(1), 195–199. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1101397ar>

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## **Fear, Russian Style: What's Wrong With Russian Horror?<sup>1</sup>**

Dmitrii Sokolov

During the 2010s, Russian cinema experienced a renaissance of horror, a genre that has long been considered unimportant, unworthy of serious attention from viewers and critics alike. Though domestic horror films (*Trackman* [Igor Shavlak, 2007], *SSD* [Vadim Shmeliov, 2008], *The Phobos* [Oleg Asadulin, 2010]) were released from time to time throughout the 2000s, they remained largely isolated (and rarely successful) experiments. In recent years, however, notable changes have occurred which are not only quantitative but qualitative. These days there are often as many horror films coming out in one year as there used to be in three or four—and the stream shows no signs of petering out.

Even more importantly, some Russian horror films (*The Bride* [Sviatoslav Podgaevskiy, 2017], *Sputnik* [Egor Abramenko, 2020]) have achieved significant success in international markets. Lastly, horror is increasingly making inroads into the TV sphere (*Don't Be Afraid, Call Center* [both 2020]) and a global breakthrough turned out to be possible there, too. Most recently, the Russian series *To the Lake* (2019), which appeared on Netflix, was greeted with laudatory reviews from Stephen King.

Even so, a significant portion of the horror films shot in Russia still lags behind other genres in terms of box office success and cannot compete with international products. Moreover, while in foreign cinema horror has become quite the respectable genre within which well-formulated social commentary is possible, in Russia horror films, it seems, remain in the category of the pure entertainment product, and not a particularly high quality one at that. What are the reasons for this dismissive attitude toward horror films, and what prevented the formation of a Russian school of horror?

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<sup>1</sup> The original text in Russian was published on 31 October 2020 in *Kino-Teatr* (<https://www.kino-teatr.ru/blog/y2020/10-31/1446/>).

## Reason One: History

Horror as a genre was practically absent in Soviet cinema, although quite a few films that were highly popular both domestically and abroad were produced in adjacent genres: from spy thrillers and action films to widely recognized masterpieces of drama and science fiction. The reason for this strange gap lay in ideology. The concept of Socialist Realism that reigned supreme over Soviet art oriented itself toward rationalism and considered any element of the supernatural or display of violence outside specific contexts (such as wartime) to be signifiers of the ideologically alien and even hostile.

With the advent of Perestroika and decline in censorship, Soviet filmmakers began to experiment, now and again creating strange genre hybrids where science fiction, horror, action, and even fantasy intertwined in the most bizarre ways. It all looked, to put it mildly, peculiar, and could easily have become its own special category of cult cinema. One need only remember *Curse of Snakes Valley* (Marek Piestrak, 1988), a Soviet-Polish venture in the spirit of the *Indiana Jones* franchise, or *The Werewolf Hour* (Igor Shevchenko, 1990), in which an elderly journalist transforms into a bloodthirsty werewolf. And while some films from the turn of the 1980s into the 1990s turned out really to be quite impressive—like *Contact* (Albert S. Mkrtchian, 1992) or *Mr. Designer* (Oleg Tepstov, 1987)—they were exceptions within the murky stream of Perestroika and post-Soviet trash.

All of this largely shaped the perception of horror as a deliberately low-brow genre intended for the margins and held up the formation of any kind of notable horror tradition in Russian cinema. As a result, throughout the 1990s Russian horror films emerged as if into a void. There was no stable cultural environment surrounding them from which they could draw inspiration just as there was no tradition on which they could lean. The significance (and mastery) of those spheres of mass consciousness that could become a source of plots for horror would be determined much later.

## Reason Two: Finance

Far and away the most significant source of financial support for film in Russia continues to be the Cinema Fund and the Ministry of Culture, behind each of which stands the state. While strict criteria for the selection of projects to support do not exist and some horror films even receive state funds, it is difficult to imagine these institutions harboring sympathy for horror films and

thrillers. In some ways, this is understandable. Horror is, in principle, a risky genre that flirts with potentially taboo themes—lots of private investors even hesitate to get involved. In many European countries (from the UK to Sweden), however, government agencies often assist filmmakers with budgets to create their genre films, among which horror projects are not uncommon.

In Russia, horror projects have only begun to receive active financial support in recent years. This has yielded some notable results. Along with an increase in the number of domestic horror films at the box office, domestic TV projects have appeared, as well as an entire channel dedicated to horror. One important nuance is that we are speaking only of private investment; the Cinema Fund, as recently disclosed data demonstrates, on the whole primarily funds unprofitable projects.

### **Reason Three: Culture**

The prejudice against horror that exists in Russia to this day is somewhat reminiscent of the condescending attitude (occasionally bordering on contempt) towards American comedies, which are perceived as a set of low-brow gags built, in the main, around physiology. In the same vein, horror films are imagined as a set of clichés that can be combined however one desires, so long as they are chock-full of creepy music, jumpscars, and spectacular shots of some appropriate location—from the solitary hut in a dark forest to underground passages on an abandoned subway line.

The error of this view consists at the very least in the fact that even outwardly straightforward genre films are formed, first, from a large set of templates and, second, that these templates must be combined in such a way that they complement each other as much as possible. Absent this, the plot transforms into a disjointed morass of different concepts: the examples of *Deadly Still* (Anton Zenkovich, 2018) and, to a lesser extent, *SSD* speak for themselves. The main challenge is not even correctly assembling a film according to genre patterns but in adapting foreign examples to local flavor.

This seems to be the recipe for the success of the few projects that have attracted attention outside Russia. *Sputnik* sets the typical sci-fi horror plot about infection by an alien organism in a specifically Soviet context, resonating with the theme of space exploration strongly associated with the name of Russia both at home and abroad. A little earlier *The Bride*, which became a hit in Latin America, used a custom characteristic of pre-revolutionary Russia as the basis

for a standard mystical folk-horror piece on the clash between modern people and ancient, sinister traditions.

Notably, the recently released *Superdeep* (Arseny Siuhin, 2020) also attempts, consciously or not, to build body horror into the urban legend popular in the West about the "well to hell" dug by Soviet engineers. This rule also works in reverse. It is worth recalling that, for example, the slasher film—youth horror that experienced its golden age in the 1980s—originated in a purely American cultural environment, and its popularity abroad almost never reached the same heights it achieved in the domestic market. Similarly, many Russian projects that fall under the broadest possible interpretation of horror—like *Gogol* [Egor Baranov, 2017] or the new version of *Viy* (Oleg Stepchenko, 2014)—made an impression in Russia but went practically unnoticed internationally.

For all its numerous problems, Russian horror undoubtedly has potential. It is even possible to outline two fundamental directions its development may take in the coming years based on what is currently happening in the genre. It is important to remember here that in Russia there are two very different but equally significant strata of horror stories that can be adapted not just for local consumption, but internationally as well.

The first stratum is the pre-revolutionary tradition, of which Gogol can be taken as the key author. His stories entered the Soviet literary canon as romantic variations on a folkloric theme due to ideological reasons, but their colossal horror potential still cut through the omnipresent Soviet “nationality.” It is hardly a coincidence that the most famous Soviet folk horror film *Viy* (1967) exploited the Gogolian legacy. And although the first efforts to rediscover Russian horror classics at the start of the 1990s were often clumsy, by the 2010s many authors had once again begun paying close attention to this classic heritage, rethinking it in a modern mode.

The second stratum is the tradition of Soviet urban legends that arose and proliferated en masse during the twilight years of the USSR, laying the groundwork for all sorts of stories depicting the intersection of dark humor, the realities of Stagnation, and the specific imagery of the Uncanny, which appeared more readily in the child than the adult imagination. This heritage only began to see development in the mid-2010s (the *Queen of Spades* diptych [2016, 2019]), but its potential is far from depleted, as evidenced by the recent announcement of Aleksei Ivanov’s horror series *Kitchenblock* (2021), where the theme of a Young Pioneer camp is juxtaposed with vampirism.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Many of the films mentioned in this article are available to stream online for free at Soviet & Russian Movies Online: <https://sovietmoviesonline.com/>.

Generally speaking, Russian horror remains in a state of infancy, although the speed with which it is developing—especially in comparison to previous decades—cannot help but make an impression. It is unlikely that horror films in Russia will become a platform for deep social criticism or pronouncements on the outrage du jour, but the potential is there to create a quality product in Russia, however irregularly. The extent to which it will be made use of—only time will tell.

— *Translated by Felix Helbing*

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- 2023 -

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