



 **Tomasz Fisiak**
University of Lodz

Grande Dame Guignol at 60: A Review of *Crazy Old Ladies: The Story of Hag Horror* by Caroline Young (BearManor Media, 2022)

The year 2022 marked an important date in the history of Gothic cinema: namely, the 60th anniversary of the premiere of Robert Aldrich's *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*, starring two Hollywood legends in the shape of Joan Crawford and Bette Davis—a film that, according to Luke Buckmaster, still “packs a punch.” Its October 1962 release and subsequent success gave birth to a cinematic genre that would remain popular for at least a decade. Film critics quickly adopted several names to refer to *Baby Jane* and its numerous follow-ups—Grande Dame Guignol, hag horror, psycho-biddy—with only the first one remaining fairly neutral and unbiased. The films were an uncanny mixture of thriller, horror, camp aesthetics and glamour. Grande Dame Guignol productions would usually involve aging actresses of Hollywood's yesteryear playing emotionally and mentally disturbed women dealing with numerous past and present traumas. As The Terror Trap website accurately observes,

[w]hether the horror projects were well-written thrillers, shameless exploitation, or outright splatterfests, these stormtroopers from Hollywood's golden era of the 1930s and 1940s seized the opportunity for steady work. And what work it was! These newfound films provided them with a diverse range of juicy roles, from that of the scheming heiress, to the beleaguered victim, to that of a murderess hag.

In his seminal work on the genre, the 2009 *Grande Dame Guignol Cinema: A History of Hag Horror from “Baby Jane” to “Mother,”* Peter Shelley reminds readers that the genre “is an amalgamation of two key

and seemingly contradictory concepts—the grande dame and Grande [sic] Guignol” (1), the latter signifying a French theatre specializing in gory, macabre performances that never shied away from scenes of explicit violence. Shelley seems to agree with The Terror Trap’s view on the genre’s eclecticism, calling GDG “a subgenre of the larger film genres of crime, drama, film noir, horror, mystery, and thriller, often appearing with elements of melodrama, comedy, fantasy, and musicals” (2). Sadly, a few years after the *Baby Jane* premiere, the cinematic fad would fade into oblivion, including in the academic world, with few exceptions, such as Charles Derry’s 1977 *Dark Dreams: A Psychological History of the Modern Horror Film (The Horror Film from “Psycho” to “Jaws”)*, where he termed *Baby Jane* and its imitations horrors of personality. However, over approximately the last 15 years there has been a steady revival of interest in the hagsploitation movement,¹ triggered first and foremost by the publication of Shelley’s aforementioned magnum opus, which was followed by a range of contributions scattered in different edited volumes or journals (see, for example, Fisiak; Harrington; Pagnoni Berns et al.; a chapter in Shary and McVittie; Walker; selected essays in a collection edited by Bowdoin Van Riper and Miller; an updated 2009 version of Derry’s *Dark Dreams*). Hence, it should not be surprising that the 60th anniversary of *Baby Jane*’s cinematic debut would inspire new publications devoted not only to this film but also to the genre it inspired. Apart from online articles (including Buckmaster’s celebratory commemorative piece in *The Guardian*), what merits attention is a new book discussing the highs and lows not only in the genre’s development but also in their stars’ careers. Titled *Crazy Old Ladies: The Story of Hag Horror*, it is simultaneously a captivating narrative of Hollywood’s golden years and a poignant analysis of how it is to be a woman, especially a middle-aged one, in an industry “where the lifespan of an actress is usually five years” (Shelley 2).

The book’s author, Caroline Young, explains that she intentionally picked such an eye-catching title, as “a twist on some of the unflattering terms women are called when they reach what’s euphemistically known as ‘a certain age’” (5). Young asserts that her goal is “not to insult or degrade” but rather to “examin[e] the way older women are depicted in cinema, by delving behind the scenes of the making of some of the classics in the genre, exploring the societal context of the period” (5). Judging by the author’s previous works, including *Hitchcock’s Heroines*, *Roman Holiday: The Secret*

¹ The recent fascination with *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* was also fuelled by the FX television docudrama *Feud: Bette and Joan* (created by Ryan Murphy, Jaffe Cohen and Michael Zam, 2017) that revolved around the real-life conflict between *Baby Jane* co-stars. The series itself drew a lot of inspiration from Shaun Considine’s biographical *Bette and Joan: The Divine Feud* (1989).

Life of Hollywood in Rome or *Classic Hollywood Style*,² one might rest assured that GDG as a genre is analyzed in a much wider context.

Indeed, *Crazy Old Ladies* proves that its author is truly invested in her narrative, paying attention to many details that significantly differentiate her book from Shelley's work, these two texts being in fact the only ones devoted exclusively to Grande Dame Guignol. Contrary to Shelley, who introduces the fairly rigid structure of an extensive introductory part and a succession of chapters discussing 45 selected films, Young opts for a more liberal form, choosing only a handful of the films that Shelley wrote about,³ her narration smoothly moving between film descriptions, background information regarding the actresses, the set, the filming process, etc. Although Young's narrative might suffer from occasional lapses of coherence, it remains riveting, especially when the author interlaces film descriptions with background details concerning the cast members' on-set antics or juicy biographical details, and thus demonstrates her unabashed enthusiasm towards the book's subject matter. Young's personal investment is further enhanced by the inclusion of brief interviews with actors who once starred in hag horrors, such as Mark Lester, a child actor who appeared alongside Shelley Winters in *Whoever Slew Auntie Roo?* (dir. Curtis Harrington, 1971), or the legendary Piper Laurie, who played Margaret White in Brian De Palma's *Carrie* (1976). What also merits praise is a section featuring a selection of rare photographs from the films' sets and stills from the productions themselves. Their order is rather surprising, though, not keeping any chronology and giving a slight impression of disorganization. Moreover, the captions require proofreading as there are a few spelling errors and film titles are not italicized. Occasional issues with italicization, hyphenation or punctuation throughout the book indicate the need for more careful editing overall. What might also be corrected in future editions is a small number of factual errors such as confused names or dates ("Olivia Spencer" instead of "Octavia," p. 4; "Margaret Sullivan" instead of "Sullavan," p. 203; "Raquel Welsh" instead of "Welch," p. 229; "1966" as the year of *Rosemary's Baby* cinematic release, p. 17).

² On her website, Young describes herself as "a freelance writer and author specialising in fashion, pop culture and classic cinema," her books confirming a consistent authorial vision.

³ It is worth noting that Young discusses films that Shelley deliberately excluded from his analysis, e.g., *Valley of the Dolls* (dir. Mark Robson, 1967), *Rosemary's Baby* (dir. Roman Polański, 1968) and *The Exorcist* (dir. William Friedkin, 1973). What is more, for Young, "[t]he 'Hag Horror' subgenre . . . may be . . . aligned with the sixties and seventies, but the themes of . . . tragic spinsters, damaging mothers and terrifying crones is [sic] one that has lived on in many different guises" (368). Hence, by the end of her work, the author makes an interesting connection between GDG productions and slasher films that would dominate the cinematic horror scene in the US in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Despite the minor flaws mentioned above, Young's book deserves attention. Partly academic (thanks to illuminating references to, for instance, Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* and Jackie Byars's *All that Hollywood Allows: Re-reading Gender in 1950s Melodrama*), partly biographical, partly pure entertainment, *Crazy Old Ladies* is a worthy contribution to the studies of Grande Dame Guignol as a separate cinematic trend. "Above all," Young writes, "it's a celebration of some of the most iconic stars of the Golden Age of Hollywood" (5). As the reader quickly learns, this is not an unfounded claim.

WORKS CITED

- Bowdoin Van Riper, A., and Cynthia J. Miller, editors. *Elder Horror: Essays on Film's Frightening Images of Aging*. McFarland, 2019.
- Buckmaster, Luke. "What Ever Happened to Baby Jane? Still Brilliantly Shocking at 60." *The Guardian*, 26 Apr. 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2022/apr/27/what-ever-happened-to-baby-jane-still-brilliantly-shocking-at-60>, accessed 20 July 2023.
- Derry, Charles. *Dark Dreams: A Psychological History of the Modern Horror Film (The Horror Film from "Psycho" to "Jaws")*. A. S. Barnes, 1977.
- Derry, Charles. *Dark Dreams 2.0: A Psychological History of the Modern Horror Film from the 1950s to the 21st Century*. McFarland, 2009.
- Fisiak, Tomasz. "Grande Dame Guignol and the Notion of the Aftermath: A Case Study of Robert Aldrich's *Hush . . . Hush, Sweet Charlotte* (1964)." *Aftermath: The Fall and the Rise after the Event*, edited by Robert Kusek, Beata Piątek and Wojciech Szymański, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2019, pp. 319–29.
- Fisiak, Tomasz. "Hag Horror Heroines: Kitsch/Camp Goddesses, Tyrannical Females, Queer Icons." *Redefining Kitsch and Camp in Literature and Culture*, edited by Justyna Stępień, Cambridge Scholars, 2014, pp. 41–52.
- Fisiak, Tomasz. "'Hollywood is no place for idealists': Hollywood as Dystopia in Cinema and Fiction." *Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich/The Problems of Literary Genres*, vol. 63, no. 1, 2020, pp. 111–20. <https://doi.org/10.26485/ZRL/2020/63.1/9>
- Fisiak, Tomasz. "'I've made you ugly': Disease, Death and Decay in What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?" *Disease, Death, Decay in Literatures and Cultures*, edited by Ryszard W. Wolny and Katarzyna Molek-Kozakowska, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Opolskiego, 2018, pp. 205–12.
- Fisiak, Tomasz. "What Ever Happened to My Peace of Mind? Hag Horror as Narrative of Trauma." *Text Matters: A Journal of Literature, Theory and Culture*, vol. 9, 2019, pp. 316–27. <https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.09.19>

- Harrington, Erin. *Women, Monstrosity and Horror Film: Gynaehorror*. Taylor & Francis, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315546568>
- Pagnoni Berns, Fernando Gabriel, Leonardo Acosta Lando, and Diego Foronda. "The Evil Dame in British Horror Film: Domestic Nightmare and Change of Times in *Fanatic* and *Persecution*." *Representations of the Mother-in-Law in Literature, Film, Drama, and Television*, edited by Jo Parnell, Lexington, 2018, pp. 139–54
- Shary, Timothy, and Nancy McVittie. *Fade to Gray: Aging in American Cinema*. U of Texas P, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.7560/717794>
- Shelley, Peter. *Grande Dame Guignol Cinema: A History of Hag Horror from "Baby Jane" to "Mother."* McFarland, 2009.
- The Terror Trap. "Ladies of the Grand Guignol: An Essay on Actress Exploitation Films of the 1960s and 1970s." *The Terror Trap*, <http://www.terrortrap.com/specialfeatures/grandguignol/>, accessed 24 July 2023.
- Walker, Billie. "Hagsploitation: Horror's Repulsion Of The Ageing Woman." *Refinery29*, 29 Mar. 2022, <https://www.refinery29.com/en-gb/hagsploitation-horror-ageing-woman>, accessed 24 July 2023.
- Young, Caroline. "About Caroline Young." *Caroline J. Young*, <http://www.carolinejyoung.com/>, accessed 24 July 2023.

Tomasz Fisiak is Assistant Professor in the Department of British Literature and Culture, Institute of English Studies, University of Lodz, Poland. His monograph *She-(d)evils? The Construction of a Female Tyrant as a Cultural Critique* was published in 2020 by Peter Lang. His publications cover topics such as feminist auto/biographies, Gothic fiction, horror cinema in the 1960s and the 1970s, and popular/pulp culture. He is Managing Editor of *Text Matters: A Journal of Literature, Theory and Culture*. He is also a member of the Board of Polish Association for the Study of English (PASE). Currently, he works as a team member of the project *Word, Sound and Image: Intertextuality in Music Videos* no. 2019/33/B/H52/00131 financed by National Science Centre in Poland. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5514-1287>
tomasz.fisiak@uni.lodz.pl