

CANNIBALS, RITUAL MURDERERS, ORGAN ROBBERS: THE DARKER SIDE OF FOLKLORE



Christa Agnes Tuczay. *Die Herzesser. Dämonische Verbrechen in der Donaumonarchie*. Wien: Seifert Verlag, 2007. 160 pp.

Christa A. Tuczay's book provides a detailed overview of the darker side of folklore: killings with a religious background, on which the author has gained material from court minutes, folktales, hearsays, and the press and fiction of different eras. Traces of thematic folklore can be found already in the Bible and in Ancient Greek myths. The author has paid special attention to the cases concerned with removing and eating of the heart. However, the author has not aimed at finding the final truth or the motives for these crimes, but rather at placing this complex lore in the framework of European cultural history.

Tuczay describes cannibalism as an act usually attributed to the cultural *other* as a powerful symbol, which has been associated with most different peoples and ethnic groups from the times immemorial, and which has sometimes also been successfully applied as a means of propaganda. Among other things, the author also discusses the role of *interpretatio christiana* in the demonisation of fellow citizens (for instance, the questions proceeding from Christian discourse, which were posed at trials to those accused of witchcraft, greatly influenced the evolution of cannibalism lore). While some Early Middle Age sources still argue that "pagan beliefs" about women feeding on human flesh are a complete nonsense, then under the influence of Late Middle Age demonological writings the situation changes and the defendants' testimonies increasingly feature – often supported by torture – descriptions of cannibalism and removal of body parts for ritual purposes.

Tuczay mentions that a modern researcher often fails to differentiate between a legend and reality; yet, it was also difficult for the then narrators and even the perpetrators. For instance, folk tales about a specially processed hand, which, when carried along, was supposed to make the thief invisible, spread widely, and this kinds of accusations were frequent at courts, yet in reality evidence was very scarce. Cases of cannibalism could arouse heated arguments between the religious and court authorities of the time (for example, whether a human being was able to turn into a werewolf and, in this form, kill small children), and more often than not, the defendant's life depended on which opinion got the upper hand.

A separate chapter is dedicated to vampire belief; for instance, changes in the acts and characteristics attributed to vampires throughout time. Also, the author provides an overview of the evolution of the fairytale about the Bluebeard in different literary and folk presentations.

The numerous detailed descriptions and examples test the endurance limits of even folklorists; however, in a certain sense, the presentation of such material also makes sense, as in light of one's own reactions the effectiveness of certain symbols and images (e.g., murdering of children, certain ways of torturing) is especially clearly perceivable

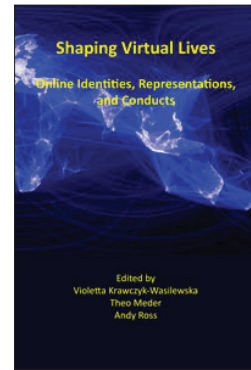
and we might also understand the reasons why some of them can be encountered even today, for instance, as interpreted by the modern mass media.

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HOMO LUDENS: DESCRIBING VIRTUAL LIVES

***Shaping Virtual Lives. Online Identities, Representations and Conducts.* Violetta Krawczyk-Wasilewska, Theo Meder, Andy Ross (eds.). Lodz: Lodz University Press, 2012. 148 pp.**

Real life and virtual reality – these are two categories that, when explored, can reveal quite a bit about contemporary people and the present of the whole human culture. The seven articles in the collection *Shaping Virtual Lives. Online Identities, Representations and Conducts*, authored by researchers with the background of mainly folkloristics or ethnology, are dedicated to the exploration of the Internet. The book is compiled on the basis of papers on Internet studies from a panel session of the SIEF congress in Lisbon in 2011.



The collection deals with a range of topics related to social media and the Internet: rules, rituals, moralities, self-representations and gaming; stereotypes and rivalry on Russian Internet forums; grief and mourning and commemoration of suicide victims on the Internet; the way that the Internet can be used as a medium by the new religious movements.

Below I dwell upon a few studies in the collection that somehow addressed me more or made me find parallels at home. The dominant key word in this collection could easily be *homo ludens*, as four studies out of the seven focus on play and playfulness and person's self-image in this play. The reality created in cyberspace can be fantastic and mystical, with its human relationships and morality as described by Óli Gneisti Sóleyjarson in his article "Rules and boundaries: The morality of Eve Online". However, several virtual games popular among adults, such as IMVU (*Instant Messaging Virtual Universe*) and *Second Life*, try to imitate human life in its diversity. In these games the participants can create a complete image of themselves, choose for their avatars everything starting from gender and name to clothing, place of residence, job and partner; they can have fun, flirt, have a wedding, engage in cyber sex and give birth to children. For example, online dating, as it is described in Violetta Krawczyk-Wasilewska and Andrew Ross's article "Matchmaking through avatars: Social aspects of online dating", which safely realises people's romantic dreams, is an increasingly popular trend in the cyber world, but actually also business, because the creators of these online environments collect real money from the participants for a romantic date in a virtual Paris or New York café.

Theo Meder in his article "‘You have to make up your own story here’: Identities in cyberspace from Twitter to Second Life" does not define these environments as games