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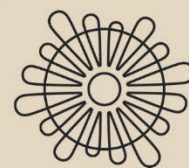
Zadar April 11-12th 2024

# "What my Granny Once Told Me"

## International Conference on Urban Legends, Myths and Horror

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**“What my Granny Once Told Me”... International  
Conference on Urban Legends, Myths and Horror**

11–12 April, University of Zadar, Croatia

**Book of Abstracts**

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## Contents

Foreword .....	1
Keynote Speakers .....	2
Tomislav Pletenac – Difference between Bite Marks of Urban, Non-Urban, and Folklore Vampires.....	2
Nataša Polgar – Monsters under Our Bed, Monsters in Our Head: On (Urban) Legends, Horror and Normality .....	3
Presentations .....	4
Jennifer Cooke – “Once upon a Time...” – Propagating Player Belief in Folklore Through the Cultivation of Horrific Geographies .....	4
Angelina Ilieva – “Media Legends”: The Phantom Hitchhiker of Lesovo .....	5
Zorica Lola Jelić – Vampires as a Re-envisioned Lore in the First Two Books of <i>Praznik Zveri</i> by Zoran Petrovic .....	5
Gordan Matas – Representations of Myths in Dubravka Ugrešić’s Novel <i>Baba Jaga Has Laid     the Egg</i> .....	6
Valentina Markasović – Little Red Riding Hood as a Feminist Fighter in Elana K. Arnold's <i>Red     Hood</i> .....	7
Rosina Martucci – “U lupu Minaru,” the Werewolf between Stories and Legends in the Tradition of the Calabria Region.....	8
Fillip Medar – From Cerveteri to Camp Crystal Lake – The Etruscan Roots of the American Slasher .....	9
Jasminka Brala-Mudrovčić, Josip Miletić, Ivana Dizdar – Legends and Myths from the Gacka, Lika, and Krbava River Areas with a Focus on Demonological Folktales.....	11
Aphrodite-Lidia Nounanaki – AI Generated Legend Narratives on TikTok: When the Acting Parts Become the Tellers of Their Own Stories .....	12
Milica Petrović – Fantastic Creatures and Poetics of Horror in the Works of Milovan Glišić ...	13
Jonida Sela – Nusja e Vorrit të Bomit (The Vorri Bomi’s Bride). Versions of a Horror Urban Legend and Albanian Traditional Beliefs on Burying Places and Dead Bodies .....	14
Anamari Slemenšek – The Vengeful Mothers: A Comparative Analysis of Power and Gender in Euripides’ <i>Medea</i> and the Mexican Myth of <i>La Llorona</i> .....	15
Kristof Smeyers – (Shape)shifting: Werewolf Horrors as Psychogeography in the Early Twentieth Century .....	16
Petra Sršić – Ancient Myths and Contemporary Spaces in Rick Riordan’s <i>Percy Jackson</i> Series .....	16
Jelena Pataki Šumiga – “Death, Be Not <i>Bad</i> ”: <i>Baba Yaga</i> in Sophie Anderson’s <i>The House with     Chicken Legs</i> .....	17
Mario Vrbančić – Becoming Cat, Staying Woman?.....	18
Marko Lukić – Kenopsia and the Backrooms: Unraveling Spatial Horror in Contemporary Myths .....	19

## Foreword

Welcome to the first “What my Granny Once Told Me...” International Conference on Urban Legends, Myths and Horror, to be held at the University of Zadar, Croatia. This conference is an integral part of the larger research initiative, “Urban Myths and Cultural Geography of Horror”, that seeks to explore the intersection of urban myths, the horror genre and human geography, particularly within the visual media of horror narratives, i.e. film production, video games and comics.

Recognizing the enduring significance of urban myths and legends in cultural discourse, with this conference we aim to shed light on the importance of spatial dimension in the creation and perpetuation of legends, and how they intersect with horror narratives and human geography. These chilling and/or cautionary tales that “elegantly” convey societal fears and fascination with the unknown, offer insightful readings not only of genre-specific themes and ideas but also of complex societal issues and potential traumas.

With that in mind, this conference also attempts to steer the discussion toward the exploration of these narrative practices within the unique context of the Adriatic, Mediterranean, and Balkan regions, which, despite their distinct cultural tapestry, remain largely overlooked in contemporary research on urban legends and horror. From that it follows that the main conference objectives are: to explore urban myths as specific segments of horror narratives, to examine the interconnections of urban myths, horror genre, and human geography, and to establish a cultural geography that defines the distinctiveness of a particular region.

We are thrilled to welcome presenters from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, each offering innovative perspectives on past and present narrative practices of terrifying urban legends. Through their presentations, we embark on a journey through time and space, exploring the varied expressions of urban legends across different media, eras, and localities.

With great anticipation, we extend a warm welcome to all participants, hoping that this conference fosters inspiring and insightful conversations that will enrich our understanding of urban legends and horror.

## Keynote Speakers

We are proud to announce two of our conference's keynote speakers:



**Tomislav Pletenac** is a Professor of Cultural Anthropology at the Academy of Fine Arts, University of Zagreb. His main interests are cultural trauma, popular culture, and theoretical psychoanalysis. Apart from numerous articles in scientific journals, he wrote studies on fantastic creatures of Istria and Kvarner, Balkan vampires, and the urban anthropology of Zagreb. Additionally, he wrote (with co-author Boris Perić) books of literary essays: *You Cannot Do It* (anti self-help), *Textbook for Extremists*, *Croatian Political Animals* and *Forced to Think: How Rock 'n' Roll Can Help You to Think Less*. Tomislav Pletenac also translates Nick Cave lyrics into the kajkavian dialect and occasionally performs them on the piano. Tomislav Pletenac will deliver a lecture titled **“Difference between Bite Marks of Urban, Non-Urban, and Folklore Vampires.”**

### Tomislav Pletenac – Difference between Bite Marks of Urban, Non-Urban, and Folklore Vampires

Not too long ago, a colleague of mine—an ethnologist from Macedonia—shared a story about his encounter with a vampire. To be more precise, it was not a vampire but a *vampirče*, a creature born to a vampire father and an ordinary human mother. He and his colleagues from the institute were on a fieldwork mission when the creature suddenly appeared on the open road, then swiftly ran away. They identified this creature as a *vampirče*, noting its lack of a shadow, and decided to return to Skopje. Although this story was recounted by a professional trained in interpreting beliefs, myths, and legends, we should not easily fall into the trap of accusing Macedonian ethnologists of lacking critical distance. A more interesting question arises: why did this story prevail despite the researcher's critical stance? It appears that urban myths and legends easily circulate and permeate society, transcending internal borders and hierarchies. In this lecture, I would like to suggest that narrative structures of urban myths and legends emerge around the inherent lack of any symbolic system, even a scientific one. To further explain this claim, I will use the example of the Balkan vampire, which oscillates between urban legend and folklore. Analysing the history of the vampire will lead us to reconsider the use of the concept 'urban legend'.



**Nataša Polgar**, PhD, works at the Institute of Ethnology and Folkloristics in Zagreb where she conducts research on “marginal” genres such as records from witch trials and medical records from the first psychiatric institution in Croatia- Stenjevec. She is interested in cultural constructions and representations of madness and the narrative coding of “difficult” emotions such as fear and anxiety and their reflections in demonological traditions. She is the author of the book *Vještica na kauču* (*The Witch on the Couch*). Nataša Polgar will deliver a lecture titled **“Monsters under Our Bed, Monsters in Our Head: On (Urban) Legends, Horror and Normality.”**

### **Nataša Polgar – Monsters under Our Bed, Monsters in Our Head: On (Urban) Legends, Horror and Normality**

(Urban) legends, fear, horror and the monstrous are closely related, and in the age of “picture,” “spectacle” as formulated by Jan Assmann, or dominant written culture, they found their reflection primarily in the horror film genre, leading us to anew question what constitutes the monstrous, that is, what constitutes its opposition – normal. While in horror films there is ambivalence in the representation of monsters as realistic, real beings or as embodied metaphors, in (urban) legends the reality of fantastic, supernatural beings is not questioned, i.e. monsters do not refuse “to participate in classificatory order of things”, as postulated by J. J. Cohen in *Monster Theory*. Therefore, the focus of the presentation will be on what constitutes the core of the monstrous in Croatian legends and how they reflect the society, culture, ideology which produce them, that is, how they are related to the concept of normal and familiar, the Freudian *heimlich*. Starting from the witch imaginary from the era of mass persecutions from the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, to rumors and urban legends in which similar motives appear – for example, infanticide, to the narratives of patients from the first Croatian mental hospital Stenjevec, in my presentation I will question how the terrible and fearsome are narratively encoded, pointing to places of trauma, but also to norming, normalizing and disciplining. That is, I will try to show how the (urban and belief) legends, which the imaginary of horror film continues, have a different function than “attempt to bring about a confrontation with the abject (...) in order finally to eject the abject and redraw the boundaries between the human and the non-human” (Creed 1993).

## Presentations

### **Jennifer Cooke – “Once upon a Time...” – Propagating Player Belief in Folklore Through the Cultivation of Horrific Geographies**

*Upirja* (2022) is an indie horror game based on Balkan folklore, made by an Italian developer; *Resident Evil: Village* (2021) is set in a fictional Romanian town and deals with folklore originating in the Balkans, made by a Japanese developer. The integration of folklore into the core mechanisms of survival in the affective climate of a horror game seeks to establish it as information tantamount to player/character survival. Embodiment with the avatar creates intrinsic affective links which serve to increase the retention of memory regarding the folklore embedded within. In this talk I will compare how folklore is treated mechanically and aesthetically when the developers are and are not embedded within the cultural context. The affect-modulated startle reaction has seen supporting research to suggest that negative affect (such as fear) can increase the preservation of memory (Campeau, Liang & Davis, 1990), giving fictional horror games the potential to conserve memories of folklore through fear. It has been proven that a context which is negatively valenced creates a greater startle reflex in individuals (Vrana & Lang, 1990), and this implication of greater physical bodily coupling between player and avatar further immerses them into the narrative in which survival is thoroughly enmeshed with the recognition of folklore-as-true in the diegetic context. Both games also are set in winter, and as such play with game rendering and reduction of information cues. They literalise how winter can increase fear – the darkness of the sunless season is mirrored by the blanket of snow – obscuring potential danger cues. Where spatial exploration in-game is tantamount to survival and continued exposition, the player must contend with the obfuscation of conventional game cues. This talk will outline how the adaptation of folklore into a specifically terror-inducing ludic climate works to reinstate and retain knowledge regarding the heritage of the source material.

**Jennifer Cooke** ([J.Cooke1@newcastle.ac.uk](mailto:J.Cooke1@newcastle.ac.uk)) is PhD researcher at Newcastle University looking into contemporary online consumption habits and its effect on the horror genre. She has recently spoken at the Memory Studies Association, Popular Culture & Occultism, and Fear2000 conferences in 2023 and interned with the Enslaved.org project through the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience.

## **Angelina Ilieva – “Media Legends”: The Phantom Hitchhiker of Lesovo**

The paper presents a case study on narrative development, propagation, and reception of the arguably most famous urban legend – the legend of the Vanishing (or Phantom) Hitchhiker – in Bulgarian media. A story about a phantom haunting the road to Lesovo, a small village near the Bulgarian-Turkish border, first appeared in online newspapers in February 2016 and thenceforth has been regularly recycled, republished in several versions, and reproduced in YouTube videos. The case of the Phantom Hitchhiker of Lesovo has been explored from the perspective of media anthropology with particular attention to the process of reception and interpretation of the story by media users. The study relies on qualitative research methods, such as online/social media ethnography (Hine, 2017) and narrative/discourse analysis. ‘Media legends’ is a term the author uses to examine the digital paths of contemporary legendary circulation and related media practices, including narrating or enacting the story in digital forms and discussing its authenticity via social media. The notion allows an analysis of urban myths and legends with attention to specific media phenomena, such as clickbait websites, fake news, and participatory culture (Jenkins et al. 2016).

**Angelina Ilieva** ([Angelina.ilieva@iefem.bas.bg](mailto:Angelina.ilieva@iefem.bas.bg)), PhD, is Associate Professor at the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. Her main research areas are popular culture, media anthropology, fan and game cultures. She is the author of a monograph on live-action role-playing games *Larp Culture: Between and Beyond* (2018, in Bulgarian) and more than thirty scholarly publications on topics such as science fiction and fantasy fandom, railway modeling, historical reenactment, role-playing games. Recently, she has been studying digital folklore and online narrative genres and runs a research project on rumours, legends, and conspiracy narratives distributed through the Bulgarian media ecosystem.

## **Zorica Lola Jelić – Vampires as a Re-envisioned Lore in the First Two Books of *Praznik Zveri* by Zoran Petrovic**

When writing his book on Slavic mythology, Nenad Gajic found that he was often “disappointed because it would appear that all other mythologies have found their way into the world in a more appealing fashion than Slavic mythology has done”; furthermore, he noticed that artists, who in their genes carried the fears and traces of ancient beliefs, were the ones who contributed with their art to a better understanding of Slavic mythology and recreated it in such a way that we could at least finally envision it. One such author is Zoran Petrovic who wrote *Praznik zveri* (the novel series has five books so



far) which combines Slavic folklore, his vision of the same, and traditional beliefs with a modern story written in an interesting genre that morphs folklore, fantasy, horror, and thriller. Modern-day detectives and profilers battle vampires, fairies, magic, and a host of extraordinary mythical creatures in order to solve gruesome crimes committed in Belgrade. Yet, the storyline often creatively jumps from the present into the past in order to reveal the roots of certain beliefs and how they have survived until the present day as well as to explain the events that were set in motion ages ago and which have dire consequences on today's affairs. The particular fascination with vampires enriches the stories and brings forth a new interpretation of an old lore. Interestingly enough, these vampires, *per se*, represent a posthuman ideal that bridges the gap between humanity and immortality, while at the same time being some kind of warped dark knights who are on an eternal quest for love or justice; constantly seeking and yearning for that which is, in their case, ephemeral. This paper will discuss how the above-mentioned books depict this seductive blood-thirsty vampire lore in a different posthumanist light and challenge the traditional and prevailing Slavic folklore perception of vampires as exclusively evil and threatening creatures, while establishing a new type of a highly creative fantasy genre in this region.

**Zorica Lola Jelić** ([zorica.jelic@fsu.edu.rs](mailto:zorica.jelic@fsu.edu.rs)), PhD, was awarded her B.A. and M.A. degrees from the English Department at California State University, Fullerton. She earned her doctoral degree from the Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade. Zorica Lola began her teaching career as an ESL teacher, and later she worked as an English and literature instructor at Mt. San Antonio College (Los Angeles), Everest College (Santa Ana, CA), and Southwestern College (Winfield, Kansas). Currently, she is an Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Contemporary Arts in Belgrade. Zorica Lola attends domestic and international professional conferences all year round. Her focus is on Shakespeare studies and the intersection of his works with film, presentism, feminism, and posthumanist theory. She also writes about works of science fiction, fantasy, and science fiction literary criticism.

### **Gordan Matas – Representations of Myths in Dubravka Ugrešić's Novel *Baba Jaga Has Laid the Egg***

This paper questions the representations of the Baba Jaga myth in its original, folkloric, form as well as its appearance in the strategic narratives by Dubravka Ugrešić. The transition from traditional to modern myths is particularly emphasized throughout the novel as it enables the readers to understand how ancient myths still influence our perceptions about older women. The paper also aims to discuss the „myths“ of beauty

and aging in modern context. Relying on ethnic and multicultural approaches to the text, we will be able to comprehend the fascination with the threatening role of Baba Jaga in folk tales and its repercussions in modern society. Moreover, providing new interpretations of the novel the paper will explain why the myth criticism differs in its methodologies and contains a number of disciplines including anthropology, psychology and history. Although some of these myth patterns are universal, they are manifested differently from culture to culture. Such an approach will help us examine the occurrence of these universal patterns in the novels and it will help us formulate the conclusions about the role of these myths.

**Gordan Matas** ([gmatas@ffst.hr](mailto:gmatas@ffst.hr)), PhD, is an associate professor in the Department of English, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Split, Croatia, where he has been teaching since 2003. His courses include American literature and culture, with special emphasis on African American as well as the US and Canadian ethnic literatures. He has obtained his PhD, MA, and BA from the University of Zagreb, Croatia. Dr Matas has received several grants for research in the United States (Fulbright award), Canada, Norway, Australia, and Sweden. His research interests include American and Canadian ethnic literature, multiculturalism, hybridity, postcolonial and immigrant literature as well as gender studies. He wrote a book on African American author Toni Morrison (2021) entitled *Toni Morrison – Literature at the Crossroads of History and Politics*, a book on Chinese American author Amy Tan entitled *Amy Tan: Novels, Identity and Ethnicity* (2023); he has edited two books on multiculturalism and published numerous articles in reviewed journals. Professor Matas has held a number of administrative duties including that of Vice-Dean for Science and International Cooperation and Head of English Department at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Split.

### **Valentina Markasović – Little Red Riding Hood as a Feminist Fighter in Elana K. Arnold's *Red Hood***

Urban legends and myths often attempt to caution the audiences against specific, potentially dangerous behaviours. As such, they are closely linked to another genre, the fairy tale. Relying of this connection, this paper examines a modern retelling of "Little Red Riding Hood" as presented in Elana K. Arnold's 2020 novel *Red Hood*. The tale, in its iterations by Charles Perrault (1697) and the Brothers Grimm (1812), warns young girls not to stray into sin, because this is punishable by rape and/or death. The aim of this paper is to examine the function of this tale in the modern context – it remains cautionary, but it also attempts to revolutionize the society. The paper shows how the frame of the

story is used to depict the suffering of women under patriarchal structures and how the novel also moves to deconstruct these structures. Namely, the tale is used to comment on the contemporary issues of rape and victim-blaming. To explain this, the paper will introduce the traditional versions of the story and then analyse the novel from the standpoint of feminist theory. It will be shown how men are figured as metaphorical and literal predators – the abusers whose monstrosity is manifested through their transformations into wolves. The novel also highlights that women's identities are still firmly tied in with their sexual and reproductive purposes, making them a "natural" prey for the predatory men, on top of which they are blamed for the abuse they suffer. However, unlike in the traditional tales, the novel enables women to fight back, and transforms the main character, Bisou, into a hunter. Yet, except for the revenge that she enacts, Bisou also seeks to transform the society itself, emphasising that it is not enough to caution women to be careful, but that men themselves must stop harassing women.

**Valentina Markasović** ([vmarkasovic@ffos.hr](mailto:vmarkasovic@ffos.hr)) received her BA and MA degrees in History and English Language and Literature from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, J.J. Strossmayer University of Osijek, Croatia. She currently works there as a Teaching Assistant and is a doctoral student in the "Literature and Cultural Identity" program. She also works as an English teacher and a freelance translator. Her primary fields of interest are popular and fantastic literature, children's and young adult literature, with a focus on the representation and construction of women's identities.

### **Rosina Martucci – “U lupu Minaru,” the Werewolf between Stories and Legends in the Tradition of the Calabria Region**

Among all peoples, contrary to what ethologists say today, the image of the wolf has always been that of a fierce and aggressive beast. Calabria, with its extensive forests and large areas represents, even in modern times, one of the ideal range territories for the Italian wolf. In Calabria, as in the rest of the world, wolf has always been seen as an enemy of man because of its propensity to attack flocks. “Lycanthropy” (from Greek *lykos*; wolf, and *ànthropos*; man) is a delusional somatic mental disorder whereby sufferers, usually hysterical, believe themselves to have been transformed into wolves. In the old legends, the abnormality was linked to the myth of the werewolf and affected individuals roamed at night, howling like said animals. Numerous are the local legends in Calabria region related to the werewolf, usually surrounded by twenty or thirty dogs behind him and called *lupu pampanu* or *marcalupu*. According to Calabrian oral tradition, “Lupo Minaru” is described as a wolf-like creature, but of superior size and

endowed with supernatural powers. He was said to live in the most remote valleys and mountains of Calabria, in dark and inaccessible places. On full moon nights, the Minaru Wolf would appear, generating myths and legends. One of these stories is the legend of the Minaru Wolf, a mysterious creature that has fascinated generations of locals. He is also called “minariu wolf” or “u lupu minaro” and is mentioned in a Calabrian folk tale, known as “The Wedding Night.” It is the story of a girl who marries a man not knowing that he was a wolf. Another of these Calabrese stories is the story of St. Martin who, one night, stops a young man who had the misfortune of becoming a werewolf from midnight to dawn, wandering around the village and countryside, scaring everyone. The Saint makes three signs of the cross to him, inviting him to get out of the Christian’s body. After his words, an earthquake shakes the earth and the demon leaves the boy’s body, whose innocent soul is now saved. A story was also published in 1883 in London in the travel guide *Cities of Southern Italy and Sicily* with the title “The Werewolf of Nicastro.” These stories, passed down from generation to generation, are part of the identity and history of the place, sharing a deep connection with the folklore and daily life of local communities. The legend of the Wolf Minaru continues to fascinate and intrigue the minds of the people of Calabria and perhaps, the Minaru Wolf will continue to roam the valleys and mountains of Calabria, offering inspiration and enchantment for future generations.

**Rosina Martucci** ([martuccirosy@libero.it](mailto:martuccirosy@libero.it)) graduated in Naples (Italy) in Modern Foreign Languages and Literatures (English, French, German) at the Oriental University. She taught English and French Language and Literature in Comprehensive Schools and State High Schools in Italy. She obtained her PhD in Italian Studies and Comparative Literature at the University of Salerno in 2017, speakers: Prof. Sebastiano Martelli and Martino Marazzi. Her research interests are addressed to Emigration Literature, Italian and Comparative Literature, Canadian Literature, English Literature, French Literature, Literature and Medieval Art. She has published several papers on such topics and texts of English and American civilization and culture of English-speaking peoples used in Italian schools. She regularly participates in international conferences at universities in Italy and abroad.

### **Fillip Medar – From Cerveteri to Camp Crystal Lake – The Etruscan Roots of the American Slasher**

Critics generally agree that the American slasher genre reached its golden age by the end of the 1970s. Films such as *Black Christmas* and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, both released in 1974, laid the foundations of some of the genre’s most recognizable classics

– e.g. *Halloween* (1978) and *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* (1980). As is often the case with diachronic analyses of horror, slasher films are seen as reflective of the anxieties present at a given cultural timepoint. For example, some of the most common anxieties that can be discerned in these slashers often signal a phobia of the potential local bogeyman, a result of the “stranger danger” epidemic in the United States wherein the nation feared for the safety of its white, middle-class children. However, by diving into the origins of the American slasher, one reaches a genre of films produced in a strikingly different cultural context with a unique aesthetic – the Italian giallo. These atmospheric films of the 1970s usually include crime procedurals, thrillers, and murder mysteries that employ elements of eroticism and horror fiction. While these films generally feature ordinary humans in the role of the mysterious killer, elements of the paranormal can at times be employed as well. A very small subset of giallo films take inspiration from the art and archaeology of the Etruscans, one of the great ancient civilisations of the Mediterranean, which in turn invokes a sense of supernatural horror through the prism of Etruscan mythology. Ancient Etruscan tombs in what is now known as Tuscany serve as the source of terror in films such as Armando Crispino’s 1972 *The Dead Are Alive* (*etrusco uccide ancora*, i.e. “The Etruscan Kills Again”). Crispino’s archaeological horror is rooted in the Etruscan landscape and, by analysing its themes and visual motifs, this presentation aims to demonstrate the influence of Italian regional horror on the development of the American slasher. The analysis will thus take into consideration both the particularities that characterise this regional and archaeological horror subgenre, as well as the classical elements that were adapted by the later slashers. In doing so, the presentation will explore how societal fears and cultural anxieties can be discerned from such narratives.

**Fillip Medar** ([medar.filip@gmail.com](mailto:medar.filip@gmail.com)) is a PhD student enrolled in the Doctoral Studies Programme in Literature, Theatre and Performing Arts, Film, Musicology and Culture at the Department of Comparative Literature, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb. Alongside an MA degree in English (Translation Studies), he received a degree in Classical Archaeology with a thesis focusing on the Etruscan underworld at the same Faculty. His primary research interest is contemporary Canadian Gothic literature, and he is also interested in examining gender and identity in the context of horror films. He currently works as a translator.

## **Jasminka Brala-Mudrovčić, Josip Miletić, Ivana Dizdar – Legends and Myths from the Gacka, Lika, and Krbava River Areas with a Focus on Demonological Folktales**

Legends and myths from the Gacka, Lika, and Krbava river areas indicate the rich intangible storytelling cultural heritage of the local people, which has been an important part of their personality and identity both in times when storytelling, including oral tradition, was extremely alive, successfully remembered, and preserved for centuries and in the age of transhumanism, relying on new ways of storytelling when everything is fast produced and disappears even faster. However, this newly created urban layer of storytelling takes over the role of customs that have died out and thus enables the survival of oral tradition and folktales. The analysis of the research material has shown a variety of genres and types, as well as themes and motifs, with the complete dominance of demonological folktales. Stories about fairies, witches, and other supernatural beings are revived narratives with witnesses of miraculous events thus becoming real recent agents presenting themselves as the ones who saw fairies and fairy circle dances or witnesses of spells and mora attacks, building on or updating the original story, depleted over time, by personal experience. Fear and uneasiness are the basic feelings aroused by demonological stories, but also most other stories, including legends about castles and living oral tradition about the Black Queen, legends about Nemri (an ancient unknown people in the Lika region), legends about haunted houses or stories about werewolves, apparitions, and darkmen. Cultivating such cultural heritage represents a symbolic coexistence of individual identity of local people with the area they populate, and which shaped them as persons. Finally, the research analyzes the formation of a specific cultural geography of this region.

**Jasminka Brala-Mudrovčić** ([jmudrovacic@unizd.hr](mailto:jmudrovacic@unizd.hr)) is an associate professor at the Department of Teacher Studies in Gospić, University of Zadar. She teaches several courses in the field of Croatian language and literature. She co-organized several domestic and international scientific conferences and co-edited several conference proceedings; she is the president of the Quality Committee and the deputy head of the Department of Teacher Studies in Gospić. She actively participates in scientific and professional meetings in the country and abroad, has authored scientific monographs, wrote many chapters in various books and numerous scientific and professional papers. Areas of her scientific interest include cultural and literary theory, Croatian literature, and Croatian language.

**Josip Miletić** ([jmiletic@unizd.hr](mailto:jmiletic@unizd.hr)) is an associate professor at the Department of Croatian Studies in Zadar. He teaches many courses from the field of the Croatian Language teaching methodology. He took part in several scientific projects, e.g. Croatian Legal

Terminology, Dialectology of the Croatian Language, and Oral and Literary Heritage of the Zadar Area. He co-organized several international scientific meetings and co-edited several conference proceedings in the country and abroad. He is the head of the Alumni Club of the Department of Croatian Studies at the University of Zadar. Area of his scientific interest include Croatian language teaching methodology, Croatian business language, Croatian legal terminology, marketing and management in education, marketing in tourism, and consumer protection.

**Ivana Dizdar** ([icagalj@ffst.hr](mailto:icagalj@ffst.hr)) is a research assistant at the Department of Croatian Language and Literature, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Split, where she holds seminars within the courses of Theory of Literature and Methodological Approaches to a Literary Text. She is a collaborator in projects organized by the Center for Comparative and Korean Studies at the same faculty, within which she co-edited two monographs. She participated in the organization of one international conference in Katowice and one in Split. She published about 15 scientific papers. She actively participates in scientific meetings in the country and abroad. Areas of her scientific interest include Croatian contemporary and oral literature, cultural and literary theory, and teaching Croatian as a second language.

### **Aphrodite-Lidia Nounanaki – AI Generated Legend Narratives on TikTok: When the Acting Parts Become the Tellers of Their Own Stories**

In the age where data visualization is a central axis of communication, social networking platforms based on this type of communication, with TikTok as a typical example, integrate more and more tools for optimal results. One such is AI technology. On TikTok this technology has been fully exploited by its users to produce videos on various topics. It wasn't long before it was also used for the 'representation' in video form of various scary stories, as well as urban legends. However, utilizing AI to represent contemporary legends includes an interesting element. The narrative is shifted from third person to first person, enabling the characters to tell their own story. The fact that the function of this narrative genre has been altered in its diffusion through the internet is a commonplace. However, giving voice to the villain or the victim is an innovative element. Therefore, in this presentation, through a long-term research combining 'actor-based' and 'topic-based' approaches, not only will the practice of representing urban legends through AI be highlight, but also the shift of the narration to the first person one. Certainly, an indicative criterion for whether the transfer of urban legends through AI is acceptable is the way other users react to watching these videos. So, in this presentation emphasis will also be given to user comments on such videos.

**Aphrodite-Lidia Nounanaki** ([nounanaki@gmail.com](mailto:nounanaki@gmail.com)) holds a PhD in Folklore Studies from the N.K. University of Athens. Her research interests revolve mainly around digital folklore and the diffusion of contemporary popular narratives (mainly supernatural themed such as contemporary legends, creepypastas, ghost-lore, etc.) through the internet, social media, and in the digital world. At the moment she is also conducting post-doctoral research at the University of the Aegean on “The function of myth in the conspiratorial way of thinking” and is working at the Hellenic Folklore Research Centre of the Academy of Athens, in a digitization and documentation program.

### **Milica Petrović – Fantastic Creatures and Poetics of Horror in the Works of Milovan Glišić**

The paper will deal with the analysis of short stories of Milovan Glišić, who is considered to be the creator of the Serbian realistic short story, and the fantastic elements that are integrated into his realism, which make the world of Glišić’s works unique and bring innovation in the form of folklore fiction. Folk fiction of M. Glišić’s work culminated in his vampiristics, his most innovative contribution to Serbian realist creativity. The paper will examine the roots of this motif, as well as its connection with the mythical model. As a constant in the writer’s work, fantastic creatures appear, together with elements of horror that also play a significant role in shaping the image of the world that is narrated. The motif of death, mystical events and fantastic creatures are precisely the characteristics of that genre, and we can determine horror as a unifying factor of these stories. Glišić acts completely in accordance with the genre whose goal is to cause fear, anxiety, and discomfort. The paper will present an analogy between the appearance of miraculous beings in mythology (religion, tradition) and the representation of beings by Glišić. Certain rules common to the appearance of miraculous beings will be established: the place and time of appearance, the specific position of the narrator, as well as the representation of the border between worlds.

**Milica Petrović** ([petrovicmilica637@gmail.com](mailto:petrovicmilica637@gmail.com)) was born in 1993 in Šabac, Serbia. She completed Bachelor and Master’s studies in Serbian literature at the Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade. She is the winner of several literary awards (“Miodrag Borisavljević”; 2018; 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> Literary competition “Vukašin Conić” 2018, 2020; Literary Competition of the “Njegoš” National Library in Knjaževac 2019). She published a book of short stories entitled *Nedelja*, which was awarded at the competition of Matica



srpska – Society of Members in Montenegro (2020). She is currently attending doctoral studies in Serbian literature at the Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade.

### **Jonida Sela – Nusja e Vorrit të Bomit (The Vorri Bomi’s Bride). Versions of a Horror Urban Legend and Albanian Traditional Beliefs on Burying Places and Dead Bodies**

This paper will present and analyze a horror urban legend circulating in Tirana about haunted places or houses situated in a former cemetery converted into a neighborhood with five-floor apartments during the 1970s. The cemetery was called *Vorri i Bomit* (Bomi’s Tomb), after the first rich man buried there, whose name was Bajram (Bomi in Tirana slang). Fifty-four years after the beginning of the construction the neighborhood is unofficially called “Vorri i Bomit” by the people until nowadays. People tell different stories about ghosts that appear in this area. The majority of the versions mention a bride or a girl wearing a white dress, or a creature wearing white garments resembling a shroud, that goes out by night in a first-floor apartment and asks people to leave the house or makes irresistible noise. During our expedition and interviews we found three houses that people thought or believed had seen suspicious stuff. Interviewers witnessed that these houses used to be abandoned for many years, but now as we spotted those places, we saw residents in two of them. Only one of the so-thought haunted houses is still abandoned. Here we will treat different versions of this horror legend and confront the ideas that relate to Albanian traditional culture and beliefs on burying places and dead bodies, the liminality of this place that is still in transition, from a space dedicated to the remains of dead bodies into one of the most populated areas in Tirana. All the information and the method used in this article are based on interviews and witnesses among residents and other people that are alive bearers of it.

**Jonida Sela** ([jonidac@gmail.com](mailto:jonidac@gmail.com)) was born in Tirana in 1985. She finished her PhD studies in ethnology-folklore at the Institute of Anthropology and Cultural Studies in Tirana, Albania in 2019 on calendric rituals. From 2021 she is a researcher of calendric ritual studies at the Institute of Anthropology in Tirana. She has been publishing different research articles about ritual studies in scientific journals, and she has been part of different projects lead by UNESCO in local and international registration of intangible Albanian cultural heritage. Her most known project was “Arapët e Polenës,” a kind of carnival that takes place in a southern village.

## **Anamari Slemenšek – The Vengeful Mothers: A Comparative Analysis of Power and Gender in Euripides' Medea and the Mexican Myth of La Llorona**

This comparative study delves into the profound narratives of Medea from ancient Greece and La Llorona from Mexican folklore, exploring their respective portrayals of vengeful motherhood, and gender roles. These two archetypal figures, separated by geography and cultural contexts, share striking similarities yet exhibit unique nuances that illuminate diverse perspectives on feminine agency and societal expectations. Euripides' classical tragedy, *Medea*, stands as an enduring portrayal of a woman's wrath and retribution. Medea, a powerful sorceress and mother, challenges traditional gender norms, wielding her maternal identity as both a source of strength and a weapon of revenge. The exploration of Medea's character involves a nuanced analysis of how motherhood intersects with power, showcasing the complexities of a woman navigating societal expectations in ancient Greece. In parallel, the Mexican myth of La Llorona offers a distinct perspective rooted in cultural folklore. La Llorona, a weeping woman seeking her lost children, embodies the enduring consequences of societal norms and gender roles. This comparative study seeks to unravel the layers of maternal power within La Llorona's narrative, delving into the cultural implications of her actions and the societal expectations placed upon her as a mother. By meticulously comparing these two narratives, this analysis aims to shed light on the shared thematic elements and divergent cultural nuances present in the myths of Medea and La Llorona. Through an exploration of motherhood as a potent force and the negotiation of power within gendered expectations, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how these archetypal figures resonate across cultural and temporal boundaries. The juxtaposition of these tales invites a nuanced exploration of feminine agency, maternal power, and the intricate interplay between societal norms and individual autonomy in mythology.

**Anamari Slemenšek** ([anamari.slemensek@edu.uni-graz.at](mailto:anamari.slemensek@edu.uni-graz.at)) is a dedicated English and American Studies student at the University of Graz (Austria), specializing in feminist literary theory. In her research, she focuses on human rights infringements – primarily sexual violence – in retellings of Greek mythology and its primary texts. Alongside her academic pursuits, she serves as a Student Assistant at the Center for Inter-American Studies.

## **Kristof Smeyers – (Shape)shifting: Werewolf Horrors as Psychogeography in the Early Twentieth Century**

How did supernatural bodies – and the horror they instilled – make the modern landscape? Travelling through the Adriatic and along the Greek coastline in the 1920s, the British occultist and vampire hunter Montague Summers collected many stories of recent werewolf attacks, from man-beasts attacking livestock to demonic wolves terrorizing villages. Placing these instances of “werewolfery... that terrible and enduring fact” firmly within centuries of regional history and folklore, he also recalibrated these encounters to develop a theory of supernatural fear that linked, fundamentally, to the landscape through which he moved. This paper takes Summers’ travel notes and the published result, *The Werewolf* (1933), as points of departure to explore how local and transnational fears of supernatural body horror interlinked. Building on the work of Maja Pasarić, Petr Janaček and Milan Jovanović, this paper asks how Summers’ representation of werewolf encounters built a psychogeography of the region in the early twentieth century. It is commonly assumed that the medicalization of lycanthropy and related phenomena in this period played a decisive role in the presumed decline of belief in and fear of supernatural horror. Regions where this decline was not observed, then, were painted as “backwards” or “superstitious.” But, I will argue, Summers’ outsider psychogeography of the werewolf-infested Adriatic was more ambiguous, at times even positive. Paying close attention to the ways in which Summers contrasted a pastoral England with the ruggedness he found abroad, I will reflect on the importance of place and landscape placed by early folklorists on the vibrancy of supernatural horror – and on the transformative potential of bodily forms of horror on representations of local community and regional identity.

**Kristof Smeyers** ([kristof.smeyeres@kuleuven.be](mailto:kristof.smeyeres@kuleuven.be)) is the Patria Research Fellow of Religion, Society and Culture at the University of Louvain. He has a special interest in fauna, flora, and folklore. He has written on the histories of wolves, ravens, supernatural horror, glitches, mysticism, gender, and popular religion. His book *Supernatural Bodies* appears with Manchester University Press in 2024.

## **Petra Sršić – Ancient Myths and Contemporary Spaces in Rick Riordan’s Percy Jackson Series**

In 2005, the first part of Rick Riordan’s Percy Jackson series, *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief*, was published. This children’s/YA fantasy novel was so popular that, four years after, it got a movie adaptation and recently a TV series. The series encompasses

five novels and they are all set in the contemporary United States. The series is based on Greek mythology which is quite masterfully incorporated into modern day America. As Greece was the birth place of democracy and culture, traits which Western Civilization was built upon, according to the novel, its essence travels with each new bearer of the title of the centre of the Western Civilization, so the action takes place in the United States. All the gods, landmarks, and monsters which are part of Greek mythology changed location and adapted to the landscape and society of America. However, it is difficult to notice if one is not connected to the origins of it, the Gods' of Olympus themselves. This paper will portray the levels and structure of Riordan's world building and the mechanics of the means which prevent mortals from realizing anything, and analyse how mythological geography of a certain place and time can be rewritten and incorporated into the contemporary world through unique representation of the idea of Western Civilization and its roots and philosophical background. The value of this presentation lies in the analysis and research of the transcription of mythological but also realistic geographical elements into a new space and time, and coding them through contemporary values and worldview, creating a unique mixture of the ancient and fantastic world and the contemporary and modern world.

**Petra Sršić** ([petrasrsic134@gmail.com](mailto:petrasrsic134@gmail.com)) received her BA and MA degrees in History and English Language and Literature from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, J.J. Strossmayer University of Osijek, Croatia. She works as an English teacher and is a doctoral student in the "Literature and Cultural Identity" program. Her primary areas of interests are fantastic literature, gender studies, and medieval English literature, with a focus on how medieval elements are used in constructing pseudomedieval fantastic novels.

### **Jelena Pataki Šumiga – "Death, Be Not *Bad*": Baba Yaga in Sophie Anderson's *The House with Chicken Legs***

In both folklore and academic literature, Baba Yaga is a Slavic figure connected to death. While Vladimir Propp sees her as a benevolent or at least an ambiguous character in fairy tales who either helps or challenges the protagonist (17), Małgorzata Oleszkiewicz-Peralba defines Baba Yaga as a "pre-Slavic goddess of death and regeneration" (7) who appears in fairy and children's tales in the form of an evil witch. Deriving her name from, 'baba', the pejorative for an old woman in most Slavic languages, Baba Yaga is typically imagined as the female Boogeyman, an ominous-looking crone who preys on (mischievous) children. As such, the figure has inspired horror films such as *Baba Yaga*

(1973, dir. Corrado Farina) and *Baba Yaga: Terror of the Dark Forest* (2020, dir. Svyatoslav Podgayevsky). Sophie Anderson's 2018 children's novel *The House with the Chicken Legs*, however, portrays Baba Yaga as a positive character. In the novel, which focalizes Marinka, a young girl who has lost her parents and must come to terms with the fact that she herself is dead, Baba Yaga is still portrayed as an old woman who lives in the titular House with the Chicken Legs, but her character subverts the typical depictions of the figure. Anderson's Baba Yaga is Marinka's real 'baba', that is, her grandmother, who protects and guides the young girl. Moreover, Baba is teaching Marinka not only to accept her death, but to take over Baba's role and become 'Yaga' herself to guide other people to the afterlife. In this way, Anderson's novel subverts the typical portrayal of Baba Yaga as an evil crone who brings death and in turn construes her as a benevolent character whose task is not to scare children of death, but to help them make peace with their own and others' mortality.

**Jelena Pataki Šumiga** ([jpataki@ffos.hr](mailto:jpataki@ffos.hr)), PhD, is a Teaching Assistant at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Osijek, Croatia. She teaches courses in old English literature and contemporary British dystopias. As a member of the Utopian Studies Society Europe, YA Studies Association, Croatian Association for the Study of English, and Croatian Association for American Studies, her field of research is Anglophone literature and culture, mainly dystopia, fantasy, and YA fiction. She has (co)authored ten scientific articles and participated at fifteen conferences. Also a member of the Croatian Literary Translators Association, she has translated sixty novels from English to Croatian.

### **Mario Vrbanić – Becoming Cat, Staying Woman?**

When it comes to monsters, contemporary theory usually refers to the monster as the embodiment of difference/otherness; the monster as disdainful, as something that deconstructs identity, an interdisciplinary hub of discomfort, therefore as something mostly negative. It is no coincidence that the West, in various historical times and for various reasons, has often found its monsters in distant geographical areas, or, even further, in various galaxies. But some monsters are not located that far. The Balkans, as a habitat of monstrous otherness, is located in Europe itself, which causes special discomforts, and perhaps special versions of the monster. In this paper, I question the portrayal of monstrous otherness in the film *Cat People* (1942, director: Jacques Tourneur), which vaguely takes the Balkan landscape, specifically Serbia, as a fertile place for the appearance of monstrous hybridity, i.e. people who transform into cats.

What is geographically distant and undefined as the Balkan otherness appears in the film in the very center, in New York, as well as in the intimacy of the main protagonist of the film, Irene Dubrovna (Simone Simon). According to legend, in ancient times the villagers from Irene's village worshipped the devil; women turned into cats when they were sexually excited or jealous, and, as a descendant of Cat people, Irene is afraid that she may harm her fiancé Oliver Reed (Kent Smith) and insists that they sleep separated, each in their own room. Therefore, she needs a shrink, Dr. Judd... I analyze how a legend about cat people has been translated into another medium – film, particularly horror narrative and how it encapsulates a clash between classical psychoanalytical interpretation of paternal authority (Oedipus complex, represented by Dr. Judd) and interpretations of 'becoming animal' (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 256-341; Viveiros de Castro 2014). In other words, should Irene become a feline human, a cat – the monster – or stay being a woman at any cost?

**Mario Vrbanić** ([mario\\_exile@yahoo.co.nz](mailto:mario_exile@yahoo.co.nz)) works in the Department of English at the University of Zadar. He holds a Ph.D. from the University of Auckland, New Zealand, and has professional experience in Croatia, New Zealand, Ukraine, and Australia. He is the author of three books: *The Lacanian Thing: Postmodern Culture, Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (published by Cambria Press, New York), *Hitchcockian Gaze* (published by Jesenski and Turk, Zagreb), and *What after Dystopia?* (forthcoming, Jesenski and Turk, Zagreb). Additionally, he has contributed numerous academic articles on postmodern literature and culture, which have appeared in journals such as *Performance Research*, *Comparative Literature and Culture*, and *New Literary History*. As an artist, he has written several radio and theatrical plays. Since 2010, he has been involved as a director and writer in various independent film projects, including the feature documentary *Kupica* (2010), the short fiction films *The Referee's Dream* (2011), *My Little Time Machine* (2011), and *The Man and the Smile* (2012), as well as the feature fiction films *Tail Job* (2015) and *Manhattan Odyssey* (2020).

## **Kenopsia and the Backrooms: Unraveling Spatial Horror in Contemporary Myths**

In the realm of urban legends and horror narratives, the concept of space and spatiality emerges as a pivotal yet underexplored element, especially in the age of digital media where urban myths became recontextualized in a new type of spatiality. What the proposed presentation argues is the creation of distinct narrative forms of urban myths, articulated through the recent online storytelling of the Backrooms phenomenon. Originating from a 2019 creepypasta, the Backrooms' myth, typically characterized by yellow walls and abandoned office setting, exemplifies the role of space in eliciting

horror, demonstrating the evolution of urban myths within digital culture and the continued relevance of spatial analysis in understanding contemporary horror narratives. Furthermore, by serving as an ideal example of a liminal space characterized by eeriness and abandonment, the Backrooms encapsulate the utility of space at the heart of a horror narrative, while also functioning, through their visual and functional attributes, as a stratified metaphor for contemporary real-life horrors.

The proposed analysis will address the broader relationship between the horror genre and spatiality, emphasizing the evolution of the genre alongside the spaces it portrays, such as, for example, the notion of the haunted mansion which acts as a ghostly abode but also reflects cultural and societal underpinnings from a decaying aristocracy to notions of intimacy and political maturity. It will then expand by analyzing a similar functionality within the developing narrative of the Backrooms. By primarily applying Marc Augé's concept of "non-places", the presentation will offer insights into the transformation of spaces from normalcy to abandonment and dread, signifying a cultural polarity. This theoretical approach, alongside Foucault's notion of heterotopian spaces, facilitates a deeper understanding of horror narratives' spatial aspect, where the essence of horror stems not from explicit threats but from the existential dread associated with familiar yet menacing environments.

**Marko Lukić** ([mlukic@unizd.hr](mailto:mlukic@unizd.hr)) is a professor in the English Department at the University of Zadar, where he teaches various courses in American literature, popular culture, and cultural theory. His research interests include the contemporary horror genre and its connection to human spatiality. Recent publications include the edited collection *Re-Imagining the Victim in Post-1970s Horror Media* (co-edited with Madelon Hoedt, Amsterdam University Press 2024), *Geography of Horror: Spaces, Hauntings and the American Imagination* (Palgrave 2022), and chapters "Heterotopian Horrors" and "Dark Urbanity" (Palgrave Gothic Handbook series, 2020).