

W. Scott Poole, *Wasteland: The Great War and the Origins of Modern Horror*. Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2018.

W. Scott Poole, professor of history at the College of Charleston and author of books on monsters, vampires, Satan, and H.P. Lovecraft, uses *Wasteland* to explore how the deep trauma of the Great War birthed modern horror in film and writing. The countries that fought in the war collectively lost 9 million of their soldiers, a horror that scarred national psyches and that reached into countless communities. Traumatized peoples sought meaning in the loss, while others looked for closure. And yet the restless dead and all they symbolized stalked the memorial landscape of the survivors for generations. In the war's aftermath, intense grief led to mass memorialization and acts of commemoration, all well covered in the national and transnational literature, but Poole makes fascinating new connections on how the emerging modern horror films and "weird" literature of the interwar years are another way to understand the war's legacy (10).

The unburied corpse and the unsettled dead were a powerful trope in postwar cultural products. The French film, *J'accuse* (1919), saw armies of slain soldiers rise from the battlefields and march home, with the "return of the dead as social criticism" (62). These restless ghosts from the front represented guilt, loss and broken dreams. The film suggested that the war had done little to settle the political issues of the day and instead laid waste to a generation. A few years later, *Nosferatu* (1922), was a shocking vampire film that terrified viewers, as this living-corpse rose from the crypt nightly to claim his victims. The producer of the film, Albin Grau, and the director, Friedrich Murnau, were war veterans, as were many who contributed to the horror films of the 1920s. That same year, T.S. Elliot's poem, *The Wasteland*, revealed his apocalyptic vision of the new world conjured from the mouth of the wartime guns.

Poole offers an extended discussion into the creepy masterpiece, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), with its insane hypnotist using a corpse-like somnambulist to murder victims. Its surrealistic nightmare on the silver screen saw a zombie-like figure—some thought a brain-washed conscripted soldier—chasing victims through the night along a shattered, broken landscape. Again, the trauma of the war had come home. *The Phantom of the Opera*, which thrilled so many in the late twentieth century as live spectacle with songs of unrequited love and intense longing, had a different, terrifying meaning when

first brought to the screen in 1925. Facially-disfigured veterans still roamed the streets of most cities in the world, facing the cruel postwar years with shattered jaws, mustard-gas-clouded eyes, and holes where mouths used to be.

The resurgence of spiritualism after the war fits into the supernatural story presented in the *Wasteland*, and while it is a subject better explored by other authors, Poole situates this movement, with its many facets of hope, performance, and pseudo-science within the larger phenomenon of hauntings, sorrow, and the lingering presence of the dead. The uncanny and the reanimated dead are at the heart of *Frankenstein* (1931), written before the war but taking on new meaning in revealing the fascination with the “age’s corpse-terrain” (215). The harvesting of cadavers by Dr. Frankenstein to make a new body, and to bring life to the dead, with his manic scream of “It’s alive, it’s alive, it’s alive,” must have pierced the millions of parents around the world who had lost a son to the maw of war.

Poole pivots easily from film theory to war history to Freudian psychology, with fascinating asides into war poets and the veterans’ experiences. He explores the cultural products of Otto Dix, Siegfried Sassoon, and other soldiers, developing new insights and literary allusions into their works when situated within the horror genre. With the dead shuffling in and out of films, novels, plays and poems, they were a presence in the lives of survivors throughout the period, and Poole offers another way to think of the war dead than through the more common lens of commemorating the sacred fallen. His accumulation of evidence in poets, writers and filmmakers creates a strong case, but it is perhaps more challenging to link the rise of modern horror to fascism, as he suggests, even with Hitler’s talk of the Weimar Republic as a “monstrous birth” or that the German people needed “wholesome fear” to guide them to their destiny (168-9). And yet readers will find new connections through the intersection of culture, politics, and horror. There is certainly evidence that the Nazis often depicted the Jews as “utterly inhuman,” portraying them as having characteristics not dissimilar to that of the vampire in *Nosferatu*: as parasites that fed off the energy of the best in the German state, diminishing, poisoning, undermining, and always hiding in plain sight.

*Wasteland’s* strength is in tracking the many horror-infused cultural products of the 1920s and 1930s, and Poole argues that the Second World War did not produce the same fascination or obsession.

However, scholars point to other tensions that arose from the Cold War and the threat of nuclear annihilation, which was reflected in those new cultural and artistic products. Poole also delves into late twentieth century horror, with the resurgence of vampires and zombies, although this rounds the circle rather than setting off along new avenues of research.

Poole writes remarkably well, draws from wide research, and has produced a broad history that is not afraid to take chances. There is a library of books already written on the high culture of the war and how it stimulated various reactionary art movements, but this is one of the first, sustained histories on how the shock of the Great War was transformed and presented in these new modern horror artistic products. *Wasteland* offers a new way to think of the war's enduring impact, first on the generation that that lived through the war, and then on those who continue to be haunted by it.

TIM COOK, *CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM*