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Ways of Seeing Polar Bears in Fantasy Films, Fiction and Folklore

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The polar bear (*Ursus maritimus*) has had many archetypal functions throughout time and across cultures and has been a key character within traditional tales and mythologies across the Arctic regions. Within Inuit and Greenlandic hunting cultures the polar bear is an important resource for food and clothing, but the bear has also held folkloric and spiritual significance. However, within the realm of anglophonic fantasy-horror films and fiction, the polar bear has frequently been portrayed as a figure of fear, recalling nineteenth century European explorers descriptions of encounters with bears in accounts of Arctic expeditions. A sample of negative representations of polar bears within fantasy-horror film, television, and fictional adaptations are explored and compared to traditional Inuit perspectives, revealing profoundly different perceptions of the natural world.
▪ **Keywords**: Arctic, Inuit, folklore, fantasy, horror, media studies, human-animal relationship

Polarni medved (*Ursus maritimus*) ima v času in v različnih kulturah številne arhetipske funkcije ter je osrednji lik v tradicionalnih zgodbah in mitologijah na arktičnih območjih. V lovskih kulturah Inuitov in Grenlandcev je polarni medved pomemben vir hrane in oblačil, ima pa tudi folklorni in duhovni pomen. Vendar je v anglofonskih fantazijskih filmih in fikciji pogosto prikazan kot lik strahu, kar spominja na opise evropskih raziskovalcev o srečanjih z medvedi v poročilih o arktičnih odpravah iz 19. stoletja. Vzorec negativnih upodobitev polarnih medvedov v filmskih fantazijskih grozljivkah, televizijskih filmih in igranih priredbah je avtorica raziskala in primerjala s tradicionalnimi pogledi Inuitov, ki razkrivajo zelo drugačno dojemanje naravnega sveta.
▪ **Ključne besede**: Arktika, Inuiti, folklora, fantazija, grozljivka, medijske študije, razmerje človek-žival

The many faces of *nanoq*

The polar bear, *Ursus maritimus*, largest of the ursine family, has had many faces and archetypal functions throughout time and across cultures. Known as *nanoq* to the Inuit, the polar bear is an iconic symbol of the north, and has featured in traditional folktales, legends, and mythologies across the Arctic and sub-Arctic regions. South of the Arctic Circle the polar bear has emerged in modern day Children's Literature, with some regularity, as a central character (Henderson, 2020). Numerous themes, motifs, and sub-genres can be detected within Northern hemisphere bear tales more generally – focussed on black, brown, and polar bears – such as origin or creation stories, success or failure at hunting, the importance of family and community bonds, interspecies communication and the ability to understand one another's language,

elements of shamanism, and connections with the supernatural that might incorporate therianthropy (the ability to shapeshift from human to animal form). In recent years, mainstream environmental communication messaging has made liberal use of the polar bear to convey the multitude of threats posed by anthropogenic climate change and global warming. The various cultural imaginings and manifestations of the polar bear are, however, often contradictory or at odds with one another.

As Steve Baker (1993) argued, culture shapes our reading of animals and there are many competing cultural representations of animals in numerous different contexts, to the point that "animals can apparently be used to mean anything and everything". Furthermore, some of the most extreme contradictory representations are found in popular culture (Baker, 1993: 4, 167). Given the vastness of the topic, this article specifically explores negative anglophonic fantasy representations of polar bears within modern day film and television, including some fictional adaptations. Once the selected sample has been discussed the article shifts to how such horror-driven imaginings differ from traditional Inuit perspectives, revealing profoundly different perceptions of the natural world and, indeed, of the Arctic as a whole. For clarity, the methodological influences taken here have not been predominantly guided by media or film studies, but rather by folkloristic and semiotic approaches.

Modern-day literary and film interpretations of polar bears sometimes retain the magical motifs associated with folktale. An excellent example is the magnificent character of Iorek Byrnison, king of the panserbjørne armoured polar bears of Svalbard, in English writer Philip Pullman's fantasy trilogy *His Dark Materials* (1995–2000), adapted as a film, *The Golden Compass* (2007) and a British BBC TV series, *His Dark Materials* (2019). Byrnison, whose name has been concocted from Norwegian *Bjørn sønn*, or 'bear son', is reminiscent of medieval Nordic traditions of the bear as a guiding spirit, or *fylgia* (plural *fylgjur*), as in *Njal's Saga* where the hero Gunnar's *fylgia* is a massive bear (Bieder, 2005: 77). In most instances this would have been the European Brown Bear though Scandinavians were well acquainted with the Ice Bear, or *Isbjørn* in Norwegian, *hvítabjörninn* in Icelandic, so a polar bear *fylgia* is not out of the question. Pullman's characterization of the polar bear king, Byrnison, is an intriguing blend of the folkloric and the biological behaviours of polar bears; he is solitary, incredibly powerful, and able to travel great distances, but he also wears body armour and can communicate in human language. Despite his initial gruff and hostile exterior, the mighty Byrnison is befriended by the determined child-heroine Lyra, and the two form an unlikely partnership in pursuit of rescuing kidnapped children. Lyra is even permitted to ride on Byrnison's back. Pullman's literary vision seamlessly blends the magical with the natural and creates a powerful image of human-bear cooperation and mutual respect. However, many popular television shows of the twenty-first century, such as *Lost* (2004–2010), *Fortitude* (2015–2018), and *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019) have preferred to use the polar bear purely as a figure of fear and horror.

Bears on the box

In the hit American ABC series *Lost*, the premise of the show is that an aeroplane, *Oceanic* Flight 815, has crash-landed on a tropical island where the survivors quickly discover all is not as it seems. In the pilot episode, some of the key characters are charged by a polar bear who is then quickly shot. In a neat piece of foreshadowing, the little boy Walt had just been looking at a scary drawing of a polar bear in a comic book before the "actual" bear attacked some of the group, and Walt himself, 14 episodes later, is attacked by another polar bear and forced to hide in a banyan tree. The whole series is littered with passing polar bear references – including another foreshadowing appearance in season 3 of a ferocious bear in John Locke's dream that helps him to rescue Mr Eko from the "real" bear. It is eventually revealed in the third season that the bears had been brought there to be used in electromagnetic research and made to push a wheel that could transport them through space and time, one ending up in Tunisia. Like many things in this series, it is not explained how polar bears could survive on a steamy, seal-devoid, tropical island! What, perhaps, is of interest within the show is the geographical and temporal juxtapositions of realism with fantasy: "the castaways, and the viewers, confronted with a space that does not adhere to the laws of nature" (McManus, 2011).

Sky Atlantic's horror/psychological thriller series *Fortitude* was filmed in Iceland but is set in a fictional Norwegian Arctic modelled on Longyearbyen, Svalbard. The show starts off as a murder-mystery but evolves into a body-shock, invasion by parasitic wasps that were frozen inside a woolly mammoth, safe in the permafrost for 30,000 years until the prehistoric animal starts to thaw out and the wasps begin laying their larvae, contaminating the local wildlife with a contagious disease. Chaos ensues, in the icy, and previously crime-free island, beginning with psychotic, cannibalistic polar bears of which one is witnessed in the very first episode disembowelling a man while he is still alive. Meanwhile the reindeer, a species that are herbivores, are observed grazing on a polar bear carcass. It does not take long for the human population to also start displaying signs of infection. The threat of the crazed polar bears remains ever present, including a scene in the second season of one rampaging through the primary school. The storyline is basically about the devastation wreaked by anthropogenic climate change but, regrettably, the environmental theme starts to wane and is overtaken by more familiar demonic possession confusingly infused with Inuit shamanism and East Greenlandic traditions of the *tupilaq* – a vengeful spirit (Rasmussen, 1908: 155; Romalis, 1983). Confusingly because Svalbard has never had an indigenous population of Inuit or Saami. There is also an uncomfortable paring of the polar bear as dangerous predator with the dangers of human sexual predators, when one of the characters, a victim of rape, says, *"In this place, things can come at you from nowhere. Monsters. You won't see them, you won't hear them, until they*

have you in their teeth [gnashes her teeth] and then they're gone, into the darkness, before you know it".

Arguably one of the more inventive manifestations of polar bear as monster appears in HBO's hugely successful series *Game of Thrones*, when a white walker zombie bear attacks Jon Snow and his crew, killing one of their number and mauling another. Out of the frozen gloom the undead bear makes its attack, and Thoros and Beric set the bear ablaze with their fiery swords, which looks impressive yet fails to destroy the undead bear. It takes a stab from Jorah Mormont's dragonglass dagger to finally put the monster down. However, the bear served its purpose by reminding our heroes "the night is dark and full of terrors".

What these three televisual examples share in common, and with the fantasy genre in general, is the deliberate use of space and place, at once real and unreal, situationally located in reality but also dislocated from it or, as Daniel Baker puts it, "what is real is what we perceive, and what we perceive is filtered by subjectivity" (Baker, 2012). Reality, in other words, is relative. For the fantasy to succeed in drawing the reader or viewer into its constructed world, this shifting between the unreal and the marvellous, on one hand, and the real and mimetic on the other, must be seamless. The fantastic or magical elements "enters a dialogue with the 'real' and incorporates that dialogue as part of its essential structure" (Jackson, 1981: 36; Barnim, 2020). Good examples of where this has worked, while also drawing heavily from mythological tropes and motifs, is in the aforementioned trilogy by Philip Pullman, J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, or George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* (on which the televised *Game of Thrones* series was based).

Another area of commonalty these three examples display is that they play into longstanding Anglocentric depictions of the polar bear as a savage monster driven by an anthropophagus desire to eat human flesh. Imagery of animals attacking humans, also referred to as the "revenge-of-nature" plot, is relatively common within the horror film genre, with a notable rise of this theme from the 1970s (Molloy, 2022). In the Western world the classic film example of the relentless man-eater is another apex predator, the great white shark in Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975), adapted from Peter Benchley's novel of 1974. The film received numerous Academy Awards nominations in 1976, including best picture, winning Oscars in sound, film editing, and original score. The tremendous and long-lasting success of the movie was in part due to the creation of a predatory, foreboding menace, tapping into deep-rooted fears of terrors lurking beneath the surface of the water, its presence signalled to the viewers by two simple notes from John Williams's unforgettable soundtrack. However, the negative impact of *Jaws* on sharks was devastating, a species that has been on Earth for millions of years, pre-dating the age of dinosaurs, turned into a monster and thus another victim of human misrepresentation and misunderstanding of the natural world. Interestingly, on the 25th anniversary of the film, interviews with Peter Benchley revealed the author

had some regrets, claiming he would not write such a book again, recognising that “the perception of animals has changed” and he “wouldn’t try to demonize an animal” or cast it as a villain as this was no longer “morally and ethically” acceptable (Rothfels, 2002: viii). On the “revenge of nature” theme we might also acknowledge the enduring success of the *Godzilla* (*Gojira*) franchise, the original Japanese film debuting in 1954. *Godzilla* belongs to the Kaiju genre, identifiable for its use of giant monsters. This gargantuan reptile is no ordinary monster but is metaphorical of nuclear holocaust, a theme which resonated well with post-WWII Japanese audiences. The underlying premise that Godzilla has arisen as a response to human folly, through our creation of the atom bomb, has been retained in the recent string of American movies from the franchise since 2014 (Skipper, 2022). Godzilla is accompanied by a whole panoply of ‘monsters’, such as Mothra and King Kong, who are not really monsters at all but are responsible for restoring balance and repairing damage to nature caused by humans. In other words, humanity is the true monster.

Creating a monster

Characterization of polar bears as villainous monsters is not new, intensifying in the nineteenth century, the “Golden Age of Exploration”, through accounts and illustrations of Arctic expeditions. The popularity of Arctic-themed narratives fed an increasingly hungry British, European, and North American reading public looking for excitement and adventure, tinged with a splash of terror, to whet their appetites. The explorers were searching for the Northwest Passage, a sea route through Greenland and the Canadian Arctic that, if discovered, would boost trade between the Atlantic and the Pacific. Part of their mission was to record anything of scientific interest, including the animals and the Inuit people. In these nineteenth century accounts polar bears were often drawn in angry poses, rearing up, with gaping jaws, or described as hunting down the intrepid explorers in packs, like wolves, despite the fact they are not pack animals but solitary hunters. These sorts of stories and images nurtured colonial notions of brave, strong, fearless, conquering white men, taming the savage lands for imperialist glory. On the polar bear Scotsman Sir John Leslie, *Narrative of Discovery* (1831), surmised:

> This fierce tyrant of the cliffs and snows of the north unites the strength of the lion with the untameable fierceness of the hyena . . . this bear prowls continually for his prey . . . he is sometimes left for weeks without food, and the fury of his hunger then becomes tremendous. At such periods, man, viewed by him always as his prey, is attacked with peculiar fierceness. (Leslie, 1831: 65)

"Fierce" appears three times in this short passage, and he goes on to give harrowing accounts of sailors attacked by bears, including an early report from a Dutch whaler and sea captain in 1668 who found himself "beneath the assailant, who, placing both paws on his breast, opened two rows of tremendous teeth, and paused for a moment, as if to show him all the horrors of his situation. At this critical instant, a sailor, rushing forward . . . succeeded in alarming the monster, who made off, leaving the captain without the slightest injury". Well, the bear, it turns out, was defending itself from the sailors who had injured it with a lance giving it a "dreadful wound in the belly", so this "monster" probably did not survive the encounter (Leslie, 1831: 67).

Leslie evidently, and erroneously, attributed polar bears with an almost unnatural desire to hunt down and consume humans. There is little in his account that honours or shows respect for the bear. In the early twentieth century, nature writer and illustrator, Ernest Thompson Seton, reported divergent views on the ferocity of the polar bear, its mood and temper:

> One portion [of evidence] proves that the creature is timid, flying always from man, shunning an encounter with him at any price. The other maintains that the White Bear fears nothing in the North, knowing that he is king; and is just as ready to enter a camp of Eskimo, or a ship of white men, as to attack a crippled Seal. (Seton, 1925–1928: 217)

Seton, whose works on Natural History were prolific, came under sustained attack for anthropomorphizing the animals he studied. One of the works he is most associated with, *Wild Animals I Have Known* (1898), contains the story of a wolf he named Lobo and his mate Blanca. Seton expresses deep admiration for the wolves but is quite unapologetic when he kills Blanca, using her body to lure Lobo into a snare (Seton, 1898: 17–54). Andrew Isenberg notes Seton's views reflected nineteenth century perspectives "which sought the destruction of most wildlife, particularly predators, in order to domesticate the environment", but that his "characterization of Lobo and his pack heralded a new representation of wildlife" as the animals "inhabit a moral universe of honour, love, and choice". In a similar vein to Jack London's *Call of the Wild* (1903), Lobo the wolf is depicted by Seton in ways comparable to the "noble savage" personification of First Nations and Inuit peoples (Isenberg, 2002). The ennobling process of the wolf did not, however, remove the stigma of fear or desire to exterminate it. A significant turning point in public perceptions of the wolf was, arguably, Canadian author Farley Mowat's inspirational *Never Cry Wolf* (1963), adapted on film by Disney in 1983, though it has received criticism for purporting to be based on truth when it should be regarded as fiction. Criticisms aside, Mowat's story did help people to see wolves less as ruthless predators and more as creatures deserving of our respect and empathy. This ennobling and re-evaluation of the wolf

has not, seemingly, extended to the genre of fantasy-horror where wolves continue to be demonized with Jaws-worthy voraciousness.[1] But what of the polar bear?

Polar bear as monster or the monstrous human? *The Terror* versus *The North Water*

A distinguishing feature of monsters found in the horror genre, as opposed to monsters encountered in folktales, is "the attitude of characters in the story to the monsters they chance upon". Noël Carroll observed, "in works of horror, the humans regard the monsters that they encounter as abnormal, as disturbances of the natural order" while in folktales "monsters are part of the everyday furniture of the universe". In horror, the monster is "an extraordinary character in our ordinary world", whereas in folktales the monster is "an ordinary character in an extraordinary world". A further differentiation is that characters within the horror genre are typically described as having an emotional reaction or physically affective response to the monster, such as nausea, revulsion, disgust, and, of course, terror. The monster is often associated with disease, filth, decay, uncleanliness. In the presence of the monster, the characters scream, recoil, shudder, cringe, or are paralyzed with fear (Carroll, 1987). Such intense emotional and physical responses to monsters are not normally attributed to characters in folktales. Distinctions between the horror genre and folktale will emerge again, in the section below, when we come to look at how Inuit stories depict the polar bear.

AMC's mini-series *The Terror* (aired US 2018–2019; UK March 2021), an adaptation of Dan Simmons' novel (2007), consciously plays to the fantasy-horror genre and notions of the 'Arctic sublime', though it is loosely based on an actual expedition led by Captain Sir John Franklin in search of the Northwest Passage in 1845 with two aptly named ships, *Erebus* (in Greek Mythology the place of darkness on the way to Hades through the Underworld) and *Terror* (a warship that had seen active duty before succumbing to the frozen north), and not one of the crew survived to tell us what terrible fate befell them during those three years trapped in the ice. The most shocking revelation, made by Scotsman John Rae of Orkney, was his discovery that some of the men had resorted to cannibalism (Barr, 2019; Cowan, 2023: 316).

The Terror was directed by Ridley Scott and there are overtones of his acclaimed film *Alien* (1979) on display here, such as the unfamiliar "alien" landscape (the Arctic) or spacescape (Outer Space), the relentless feeling of impending doom, and gruesome deaths by highly intelligent and remorseless predators that enjoy ripping people apart, an Alien from another planet or, in the case of *The Terror*, a malevolent polar bear in the

[1] A few movies continue to cast wolves as villains, mercilessly hunting humans, e.g. *Frozen* (2010), *The Grey* (2011), or as lycanthropic shapeshifters in werewolf-themed movies, e.g. *An American Werewolf in London* (1981), *Dog Soldiers* (2002), among many others.

Arctic called Tuunbaq. The bear, as Maria Lindgren Leavenworth observes, “becomes an embodiment of the hostile and unpredictable landscape, intimately connected to the ice which in itself is difficult to comprehend” (Leavenworth, 2010).

Tuunbaq is a fictional creation of American author Dan Simmons though inspired by a traditional East Greenlandic vengeful spirit known as *Tupilaq*, despite the fact the events of the story take place in the Canadian Arctic, or Nunavut, and not Greenland. *Tupilait* were created using sorcery and were sent out to harm or kill one’s enemy. In Simmons’ novel, the author takes great pains to provide the reader with a detailed back story for Tuunbaq, created by Sedna, a powerful female supernatural who lived beneath the sea. Later, Tuunbaq is banished from the spirit world to the north pole where it was forced to adopt the form of “the most terrible living thing it could find on Earth”, the polar bear. Sedna knew the *angakkut*, the Inuit shamans, would learn how to control Tuunbaq’s desire for havoc and, in time, they did learn to communicate with it, but the cost was that the *angakkoq* who spoke with Tuunbaq would no longer be able to speak with their fellow humans. Furthermore, no trespassers would be allowed to enter Tuunbaq’s northern domain. Unfortunately, this equilibrium between Tuunbaq and Inuit was destroyed with the arrival of the *kabloona* (Inuktitut word for white people) whose presence started to poison the Tuunbaq who would sicken and die. But the death of Tuunbaq also meant the destruction of the Inuit way of life, they would forget their language, their culture, and their social structures would crumble into drunkenness and despair. Simmons’ literary creation could, therefore, be seen as a criticism, or reflection on the negative impacts of colonialism.

In the televised version of *The Terror*, Tuunbaq’s relentless ravaging of the frostbitten and scurvy-infested crew is reminiscent of the grisly and unsettling vision of the supreme Victorian animal painter, Sir Edwin Landseer, *Man Proposes, God Disposes* (1864), also inspired by Franklin’s last expedition, in which we see two voracious, sharp-toothed and pointy-clawed polar bears ripping apart the Union Jack and feasting on the bones of the sailors with apparent relish, tearing, quite literally, at the fabric of British sensibilities and notions of civilization (Donald, 2010).

Turning to *The North Water* (2021), a co-production between British BBC and Canadian CBC, the five-part mini-series is based on a novel of the same name by English author Ian McGuire (2016). The story begins in 1859 – close to a decade after the events of *The Terror* – but this time the ill-fated British and Irish victims of the frozen north are entirely fictional, an imaginary crew aboard the imaginary whaling ship *Volunteer.* The men face a multitude of dangers, though not supernatural as the crew of *The Terror* experienced, but of an altogether more monstrous variety; the sinister, brooding menace of Henry Drax, a thieving, violent, murderous rapist, with no conscience but a hearty appetite for blood. Drax is the true monster in their midst (Lindbergh, Surrey, 2021).

A polar bear turns up in the fourth episode, enticed by the characters Otto and Sumner who by this stage in the story are camped out on an island and slowly starving to death. The men attract a bear with the intention of eating it. When a bear does appear, they attack it but only manage to wound it, forcing Sumner to go off on a lengthy pursuit, eventually managing to kill the angry but weakened animal. However, a storm comes on and he is forced to eviscerate the bear and climb inside its carcass for shelter. He is rescued by an Inuk hunter who takes him to the home of a Scottish Catholic priest and his Inuk housekeeper. The Inuit hunters believe Sumner was reborn from the polar bear, he is given a knife decorated with a bear carving.[2] It is this knife that eventually allows Sumner to kill Drax in the final episode.

The North Water and *The Terror* share close similarities, including the underlying premise that the real 'monsters' are not the natural or even the supernatural inhabitants of the Arctic, but rather it is the *kabloona*, who have come to the Arctic to exploit its wildlife, its people, and its resources. These stories are set against a backdrop of colonial greed and ambition. And yet, both stories utilize a threatening image of the polar bear to signify disharmony and the beginning of the end of a way of life for the Inuit. In *The Terror*, Tuunbaq is a spiritual and ecological response to the disharmony brought by the explorers and although Tuunbaq is vanquished, order is not restored until the white men are dead. *The North Water* eerily concludes with Sumner gazing through the bars at an emaciated polar bear held captive in a zoo, a grim reminder of his own experiences in the kingdom of the ice bear, but perhaps also a metaphor of the destruction of the Arctic caught in a trap not of its own making.

The largely Anglocentric treatment of the polar bear, filtered through the nineteenth century lens of the "Arctic sublime", raises questions around the role of invention and representation. Dan Simmons, author of *The Terror*, has appropriated elements of Inuit *Qaujimajatuqangit* (traditional knowledge and history) with his fictional creation Tuunbaq. However, this demonic, blood-thirsty bear is not just a reinvention of Inuit spirituality but, arguably, a complete misinterpretation of traditional beliefs about the spirit world. Derek Thiess draws fair comparisons with Disney's handling of Pacific Polynesian cultures in the film *Moana* (2016). Like Disney, "*The Terror* presents a pastiche of individual elements of Inuit culture connected by a fictional thread entirely of its author's creation" (Thiess, 2018).

[2] Traditional Inuit and Greenlandic *angakok* rituals sometimes involved spiritual consumption by the polar bear, opening a mystical connection to the natural and supernatural worlds.

Isuma: Thinking with bears

There is no generic word for 'animal' in Inuktitut but rather a series of words to identify the species according to those that walk (*pisuktiit*); marine mammals, or those that breathe (*puijiit*); birds, or those that fly (*tingmiat*); fish (*imarmiutait*); insects (*qupirruit*); and domesticated dogs (*qimmiq*). Animals that are eaten are referred to as *uumajuit* and *nirjutiit*. The conceptual understanding the Inuit have with certain species is therefore complex and the relationship with the animal differs depending on the category being discussed. Inuit knowledge of the animal kingdom is deep, developed over millennia of shared existence. Animals are not, however, considered as something to be "managed" or controlled by humans, but rather are creatures with their own agency (Laugrand, Oosten, 2014; Laugrand, Levesque, 2017).

The Inuit have long had a respect and admiration for the polar bear, regarding it as highly intelligent, capable of emotions and understanding when it is being disrespected or ridiculed (Rasmussen, 1929: 56). The bears possess *isuma*, the capacity for thought and states of thoughtfulness. Polar bears were, and still are, often viewed as individuals who have agency. The Greenlanders referred to them as *Pisuartartut*, "the always wandering ones" (Sonne, 2017: 154). Before widespread Christianization, Inuit hunters put the animals in control of the hunt, whereas the European explorers put the human in control. Furthermore, Inuit culture was based on cooperation. A slain bear was divided up and shared among the community whereas the explorers frequently shot bears for self-defence, sport or trophies, occasionally for food.

For the Inuit, the polar bear, as with all living things, consisted "entirely of souls", who would be offended if they were not given proper respect. This extended to treatment given after death. In Greenland, for instance, polar bear skulls were kept indoors and given gender-appropriate gifts (Sonne, 2017: 154). If the animal spirits were angered, the sea spirit Sedna or Nuliajuk (she has many names) would trap the marine animals, including the bear, in her hair and would only release them – by combing her hair – when appeased by an *angakkuq*, shaman-like figures. Souls were also capable of transmigration. For instance, in a story collected in Igloolik, a woman escapes domestic violence through a gradual series of animal reincarnations, her name-soul journeying from sled dog, to wolf, caribou, walrus, and raven, learning new things and experiencing different perspectives as she goes. In her aerial raven form, she is killed and eaten by a polar bear and decides to become a ringed seal. The bear, an amphibious animal, has mediated her transition from land and air creature to one of the sea. Finally, she is harpooned by her brother and so she decides to enter her sister-in-law's womb as a fetus, choosing to be reborn as a human boy (d'Anglure, 2018: 152–176). Inuit theories of soul transmigration from one animal to another are arguably different from Western European notions of therianthropy (shapeshifting). In this Igloolik example, the woman's name-soul makes a series of choices on what form to adopt next, living a

full life in either human or non-human animal forms, gaining a range of perspectives and understandings from each transmigration. Her soul does not temporarily inhabit the selected animal, as is typical of European shapeshifting stories, but rather fully becomes that animal for the duration of its lifespan. The ability to change genders is also a notable difference.

Polar bears were a particularly good ally for *angakkut* because, as we have just seen, they were good spiritual mediators. They were regarded as transitional or liminal creatures who crossed worlds, both naturally – belonging to both land and sea – and supernaturally, found in the constellations of the night sky and at the bottom of the ocean (D'Anglure, 1994: 182). *Angakkut*, who were generally a force for good, were called upon for healing, or to help ensure successful hunting, and restore balance in times of crisis, communicated with and sought assistance from a range of helpful spirits, known collectively in Greenland as *toornat* (sg. *toornaq*) and in Nunavut as *tuurngaq*. These spirits assumed many forms including that of the polar bear. A particularly powerful spirit, in Greenland and Labrador, was Tornarssuk (or Torngarsuk), master of the helping spirits. He often took the form of a mostly benevolent polar bear spirit and was also associated with initiation rituals of the *angakkut* (Nansen, 1893: 240).

As previously alluded to, non-human animals within modern-day horror depictions are distinctive from traditional folktale. Within the horror genre, animals are invariably portrayed as 'monsters' that intrude into our ordinary world, are extraordinary, unnatural and abnormal in appearance or behaviour, or are automatons lacking in personality or any real purpose beyond murder and mayhem. In folktale, while animals, both natural and supernatural, might well be considered monstrous in some regard, generally they are understood to be creatures with intention and individuality, an ordinary character that exists within the extraordinary world of folktale (Carroll, 1987). Inuit tales featuring animals such as the polar bear reveal similar distinctions from the horror genre.

The theme of many Inuit folktales is about the continual struggle for existence (Rink, 1997 [1875]: 89), whether that be from the elements, hostile neighbours, malevolent spirits, or angry predators. As with European tales, animals feature prominently. Polar bears are regularly portrayed as kinfolk, descendants of a time when animals and humans were much closer and understood one another's language. In some tales, the bears can remove their bearskin revealing a human body within. These bear-humans were not 'shapeshifters' as such, like a werewolf that could physically change its shape, but more akin to the Scottish and Irish Selkie, supernatural seal folk, that similarly wore a removable sealskin (Thompson, 1954). One major point of divergence between Inuit and European folktales is that in the Inuit tales to be a bear is not treated as a curse, whereas in European tales, such as the Norwegian tale 'White Bear King Valemon', to be a bear is a curse that needs to be broken. In the Greenlandic tale of Sitliarnat and his brothers, while out hunting the young men are caught in a storm and blown far from home on an iceberg. Landing on an unknown shore, the men encounter an old

man and his wife who feed the starving hunters and give them shelter. In time the old man offered to take the hunters back across the sea to their homeland, which he did by jumping into the sea and reemerging as a polar bear. He instructed the hunters to get on an iceberg and to close their eyes while the bear pushed them across the sea. On arrival the men asked the bear to join them for a meal to show their gratitude, but the bear replied he wanted no reward wishing only to do a good turn. Before departing the bear requested that should they or anyone in their community see a bear with a bald head not to hunt it but to offer it food. The following winter a bald-headed bear was spotted coming ashore. The hunters did as they were instructed, offering it several seals which it consumed and then swam into the sea, never to be seen again. It was said the descendants of Sitliarnat prospered greatly (Rink, 1997 [1875]: 193–197).

Polar bear characters are often cast as helpers, as well as teachers, mentors, or responsible for saving lost or abandoned humans. There are numerous stories of a bear adopting an orphan boy, feeding and protecting him, then teaching him how to hunt before eventually returning him to his community as an able and useful member of his human society. In other tales, humans adopt a male bear cub and raise it as their own son. The bear-son tale type is popular in European stories as well, but with a brown bear. In a Greenlandic variant, an old, childless couple adopt a bear son who hunts seals for them but when one day they ask their bear-son to bring home some polar bear meat, the son obliges, but then walks out and never returns. With no son to provide for them, the old couple soon starve to death. A taboo has been broken and results in tragedy (Bieder, 2005: 64–65). Tales of bears, or other animals harming or turning against humans, are usually connected to the breaking of taboos or other mistreatments. For instance, if the caribou (reindeer), another key species, are mistreated they can become invisible spirits known as *ijirait* (Laugrand, Levesque, 2017: 22). Revenge lies at the heart of many other tales, such as that of Ailaq’s mother who, upon discovering his friend Papik has drowned her son out of jealousy, seeks retribution. She enacts her vengeance by wrapping herself in a bearskin and going into the sea. A few years later an enormous and frightful-looking she-bear was spotted heading into the village, heading straight for Papik’s home whereupon the she-bear killed him and dragged him through the village by his intestines. After she had eaten him, she lay down to sleep. However, when the people cautiously approached her all they found was Ailaq’s mother’s bearskin and some bones covered with sea snails (Millman, 1987: 161–162).

Transcendent horrors

The focus on fantasy-horror interpretations of the polar bear from twenty-first century anglophonic culture has demonstrated this is a different visualization of the bear as understood by Arctic-dwelling peoples. As a genre, horror has been explained as a

reflection of societal fears and, beyond its purpose as entertainment, can be an outlet for social anxieties (Skal, 1993). If so, the prevailing message behind most of the examples cited is fear of the natural world, or that nature will turn against us, often in the context of a punishment for human recklessness. In the case of traditional Inuit stories the threat generally comes from other humans. In Greenlandic tales, for instance, coastal dwellers fear inlanders. While the polar bear might be interpreted as a threat, or a manifestation of revenge, invariably it is described as kin or as a helper or mediator of the natural and supernatural worlds. There has been no space here to discuss the polar bear as cute and cuddly fodder in Children's Literature – which again stands in contrast to Inuit associations – or its widespread usage within environmental campaigns against anthropogenic climate change, depictions that recast humans in the role of 'monster' rather than the bear who is seen struggling to survive, clinging to fragments of the disappearing ice.

What place does the polar bear hold in the human imagination? It rather depends on where you live. For Arctic-dwellers, who live with the bear and understand it, or have deep cultural ties and associations with *nanoq*, the bear is viewed, in practical terms, as a source of food, clothing, and a fellow hunter of seals, and culturally was once understood as a powerful ally, kinfolk, and link to the spirit world. The peoples of the Arctic and sub-Arctic could not survive without the animals. For those not from the Arctic, whose experience of the bear is limited or non-existent, the bear is often portrayed as a figure of fantasy or a symbol of fear and savagery, or to quote Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*:

> Witness the white bear of the poles, and the white shark of the tropics; what but their smooth flaky whiteness makes them the transcendent horrors that they are? That ghastly whiteness it is which imparts such an abhorrent mildness, even more loathsome than terrific, to the dumb gloating of their aspect? (Melville, 2023 [1851]: 197)

Such dichotomous views towards the natural world – between affinity and no affinity – inform interpretations and imaginations as to whether the bear, or indeed Nature itself, is perceived as friend or foe or something in between. In many of the fantasy-horror examples discussed, the human characters are under attack or pitted against nature; the natural world equates with chaos, hostility, suffering and death. There is, according to Thomas Birch, an almost Hobbesian attitude that "we exist fundamentally in a state of war with any and all others" (Birch, 1995), or in this case, with the polar bear. Nor is there any awareness of individuality of bear behaviour. They are, quite simply, automatons, stripped of personality, on a quest for blood. Moreover, the bear is not, in the sample discussed, a central character but rather is used as a semiotic device to communicate threats posed by the natural and supernatural worlds.

In stark contrast, Inuit culture takes a more pragmatic attitude towards the bear, fully recognising the dangers posed by living alongside the Arctic's top predator but casting it not as a villain or unthinking monster within mythological and folkloric comprehensions. If folklore can be used as a reflection of a society's fears and fetishes, or as Alan Dundes once said, as a "mirror of culture" (Dundes, 1969), traditional Inuit and Greenlandic folklore communicates a deep connection to and understanding of the polar bear, and towards the natural world in general. However, folklore is not static. It shifts and evolves to reflect the concerns and interests of the group or society. This is typically a gradual and slow-moving process – sometimes extending to centuries – but with the staggering scale and rapidity of change that has and continues to occur within the Arctic regions what impact will this have on the Inuit relationship with the bear? Europeans began travelling to the Arctic in the late sixteenth century and, to varying degrees, have arguably contributed some positives but many negatives to Inuit culture (Cowan, 2023). In the context of the Canadian Arctic the most profound and unsettling changes to the Inuit way of life occurred not in the nineteenth century Age of Exploration but in the twentieth century with a troubling record of forced relocations and suppression of culture sanctioned by the Canadian government (Alunik et al., 2003). In a few short decades peoples who, for centuries, had lived off the land, followed the animals, and fully adapted to one of the harshest climates on earth, were moved into settled communities and small towns. Technological influences have changed traditional hunting culture and, in turn, the relationship between hunter and prey animals. As with other parts of the world, the once vibrant Inuit oral tradition is being eroded in favour of the printed word. The kingdom of the ice bear, the Arctic itself, is facing the devastating effects of climate change faster than many other regions of the world which will doubtlessly force further adaptations upon Inuit culture and traditions (Stuckenberger, 2007), not to mention threaten the very existence of the polar bear and other Arctic animals. Reality, it would seem, is the true transcendent horror.

In twenty-first century environmental communication and conservation campaigning, the ferocious qualities of the polar bear, once relished by consumers of early Arctic explorers' accounts, have since been replaced with imagery of the bear as vulnerable, walking along the edges of extinction, no longer stereotyped as man-eating beast but as emaciated and ice-starved victim in need of human assistance for its very survival. And yet, in the realm of fantasy-horror, there is still, seemingly, a place for this icon of the north to dredge up old fears of a beast that can stalk people and devour them whole.

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Načini videnja polarnih medvedov v fantazijskih filmih, leposlovju in folklori

Polarni medvedi se pojavljajo v ljudskih pravljicah, legendah in mitologijah na arktičnih in subarktičnih območjih. V njih lahko odkrijemo številne teme, kot so zgodbe o izviru, uspehu ali neuspehu pri lovu, pomenu družinskih in skupnostnih vezi, o medvrstni komunikaciji, šamanizmu in spreminjanju oblik. Južno od arktičnega kroga se je polarni medved pojavil kot osrednji lik v sodobni otroški literaturi, medtem ko ga okoljska komunikacijska sporočila uporabljajo za posredovanje groženj, ki jih prinašajo podnebne spremembe in globalno segrevanje. Vendar so različne kulturne predstave o polarnem medvedu pogosto protislovne. V tem članku so obravnavani vzorčni primeri negativnih anglofonskih fantazijskih predstavitev polarnih medvedov v sodobnem filmu in televiziji. Po obravnavi primerov se osredinimo na to, kako se takšne, na grozljivkah oblikovane upodobitve razločujejo od tradicionalnih inuitskih pogledov, ki razkrivajo povsem drugačno dojemanje naravnega sveta. Inuitske zgodbe, na primer, večinoma poudarjajo inteligenco medvedov kot posameznikov, ki so zmožni delovanja.

Članek razkriva podobnosti v obravnavanih televizijskih primerih – *Skrivnostni otok (Lost)*, *Fortitude* in *Igra prestolov (Game of Thrones)* –, ki v anglocentričnih upodobitvah polarne medvede predstavljajo kot divje pošasti ali skladno z zapletom »maščevanja narave«. Takšne upodobitve niso nove, okrepile so pripovedi raziskovalcev Arktike in ilustracije ekspedicij iz 19. stoletja. Drugi elementi domišljijske grozljivke so v televizijskih mini serijah *Severne vode (The North Water)* in *The Terror*, ki sta si precej podobni, vključno z osnovno podmeno, da resnične »pošasti« niso naravne ali celo nadnaravne, temveč vpliv kolonializma, saj so kolonisti na Arktiki izkoriščali divje živali, ljudi in vire. Ozadje obeh zgodb sta kolonialni pohlep in cilj, obe pa uporabljata grozečo podobo medveda, da označita disharmonijo in konec tradicionalnega načina življenja Inuitov.

V širšem žanru grozljivk so živali vedno prikazane kot »pošasti«, ki vdirajo v naš vsakdanji svet, so izjemne, nenaravne, nenormalne po videzu ali vedenju, ali pa so avtomati brez osebnosti ali kakršnega koli resničnega delovanja, ki presega umora in uničenje. Nasprotno pa so v ljudski pravljici živali sicer lahko pošastne, vendar se jih na splošno razume kot bitja z namenom in individualnostjo, kot navadne like, ki obstajajo v izjemnem svetu ljudske pravljice. Inuitske medvedje zgodbe razkrivajo podobne razločke od žanra grozljivk. Liki polarnih medvedov so pogosto v vlogi pomočnikov, učiteljev, mentorjev ali odgovornih za reševanje izgubljenih ali zapuščenih ljudi.

Osredinjenost na fantazijsko-grozljive interpretacije polarnega medveda iz anglofonske kulture 21. stoletja kaže na to, da gre za drugačno vizualizacijo, kot jo razumejo ljudje na Arktiki. Prevladujoče sporočilo, ki se skriva za navedenimi fantazijskimi grozljivkami, je strah pred naravnim svetom ali da se bo narava obrnila proti nam kot kazen za človeško nepremišljenost. V inuitskih zgodbah grožnja na splošno prihaja od drugih ljudi. Čeprav bi medveda lahko razlagali kot grožnjo, je vedno opisan kot sorodnik ali kot posrednik naravnega in nadnaravnega sveta. Za prebivalce Arktike je medved vir hrane, oblačil in tovariš pri lovu na tjulnje, vendar so ga v kulturi nekoč razumeli kot močnega zaveznika, sorodnika in vez z duhovnim svetom. Ljudstva na Arktiki ne bi mogla preživeti brez živali. Za tiste, ki niso tam doma, so izkušnje z medvedom omejene ali jih sploh ni, zato je medved pogosto prikazan kot domišljijska figura ali simbol strahu in divjosti.

V obravnavanih primerih fantazijskih grozljivk se človeški liki spopadejo z naravo. Poleg tega medved ni osrednji lik, temveč se uporablja kot semiotično sredstvo za sporočanje groženj, ki jih prinašata naravni in nadnaravni svet. V nasprotju s tem ima inuitska kultura do medveda bolj pragmatičen odnos, v celoti priznava nevarnosti, ki jih prinaša življenje ob glavnem plenilcu Arktike, vendar ga ne obravnava kot zlobneža ali brezobzirno pošast. Čeprav folklora Inuitov sporoča globoko povezavo s polarnim medvedom, folklora ni statična. Spreminja se in razvija, zrcali pomisleke in interese skupine ali družbe. To je običajno postopen in počasen proces – včasih se razteza prek stoletij –, vendar z osupljivim obsegom in hitrostjo sprememb, ki so se in se še vedno dogajajo na arktičnih območjih, postavlja vprašanje, kako bo vplivalo na odnos Inuitov z medvedom?