Spatial relationships are one of the tools human beings use to make sense of the world around them. Geography is the field concerned with spatial relationships, while film studies is the field that tries to make sense of the world through a medium of moving images with sound. Therefore, film-geography is the sub-field of geography and film studies that combines the concerns of both fields. Anton Escher grapples with four subjects that film-geographers should explore: 1) Outline of a theory for producing cinematic areas that enables an understanding of the evolution, function, and composition of the areas and illustrates its social connections and implications. 2) Understanding the role, the function and construction of landscape in movies, which emphasizes the central theme of classic geography. 3) Deconstruction and deglification of the gradual genesis and existence of a self-referential cinematic world in media, and 4) analysis of the interaction between locations of cinematic imagination and reality” (emphasis in original, 308).

Introduction: Film-Geography

In 1972, Yugoslavia experienced an outbreak of smallpox. The report of the epidemic published by the World Health Organization describes the “index” case, or patient zero, of the outbreak: “Epidemiologic and serologic investigations confirmed that smallpox had been reported by haji pilgrim, Ibrahim H., a resident of the village of Danjane, who had visited Mecca with another 24 pilgrims from Kosovo early in 1972 and had returned via Iraq, by bus... The haji came back to his village (Danjane) on 15 February and the following day fell ill with a clinically undiagnosed illness (fatigue, shivering, and a slightly elevated temperature). An epidemiological data indicated that Ibrahim H. imported smallpox into Yugoslavia” (Litvinjenko, Arsić, and Borjanović, 2).

Smallpox Outbreak in Yugoslavia

In the 1972 Yugoslav outbreak, the setting of the opening scene is a Middle Eastern marketplace. We follow Redzepi, as he makes his way through the busy marketplace. He buys a flute from a merchant who is revealed to have visual symptoms of smallpox, after Redzepi walks off screen. We travel along with him as he travels home and, finally, is admitted to the hospital.

The film begins by following Halil Redzepi, a character loosely based on Ibrahim H., the real life “index case” of smallpox into Yugoslavia. In the horror films, the Yugoslavian government enforces a quarantine on the hospital after hearing speculation about the contamination above. However, with each floor descended, the population of the hospital begins to unravel. As the micro-civilization of the hospital crumbles, we learn that the hospital chief was having an affair with his nurse, another doctor steals drugs to feed her own habit, and the chief locks himself in his office as patients and members of his staff die of smallpox.

Variola Vera

Variola Vera is named after the virus that causes smallpox. The film begins by following Halil Redzepi, a character loosely based on Ibrahim H.—the real life “index case” of the 1972 Yugoslav outbreak. The setting of the opening scene is a Middle Eastern marketplace. We follow Redzepi, as he makes his way through the busy marketplace. He buys a flute from a merchant who is revealed to have visual symptoms of smallpox, after Redzepi walks off screen. We travel along with him as he travels home and, finally, is admitted to the hospital.

The film, then, focuses on Belgrade’s General Hospital. The drama of the film is driven by the transmission and impact of the disease as it affects the population of the hospital, as well as the emotional and social effect of the enforced quarantine.

What of Elevators and Stairwells?

In a study about the social implications of the confined spaces of elevators in narrative theatre, David Scott Diffrient describes the elevator as a way for people to come together regardless of class, race, age, or gender. The stairwells in Variola Vera have a similar function. As the hospital crowd descends floors throughout the film, the social hierarchy of the hospital crumbles, creating a social equity amongst the doctors, nurses, and patients.

Horror and Verticality in Variola Vera

In “Horror Movies and the Cognitive Ecology of Primary Metaphors” (2014), Bodo Winter interrogates the way in which verticality and brightness impact the affective power of horror films. He does this by considering two key metaphors: “EVIL IS DOWN” and “EVIL IS DARK” (capitalization in original, 152). He observes that the horror film seeks to foreground the negative domains for both verticality and brightness: low and dark.

To Winter, “[n]egative associations with low vertical position are thought to stem from a... Set of environmental correlations. When feeling sad or ‘down,’ people may physically assume a lower position, such as lowering their head. And when somebody is small, looking ‘up’ to others, then one is (generally) also in a physically inferior position” (152). This is observed in many horror movies. In Psycho (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960), Norman’s dead mother is discovered in the basement cellar; in The Blair Witch Project (Eduardo Sánchez and Daniel Myrick, 1999), the teenage filmmakers encounter the witch in the basement; and in The Ring (Gore Verbinski, 2002), Samara is linked to an underground water well. Thus, all these films utilize Winter’s postulation that evil is downstairs, or downward.

Conclusion

I have demonstrated how Variola Vera activates the symbol of the downward staircase to suggest moral degradation and dissolution of the social order. With each descent the micro-society of the hospital becomes a bit more unstable. This culminates with the realization that the hospital’s chief was acting in his own best interest and failing both his mistress (letting her die alone) and the patients in the children’s ward (instead of giving the children medicine to protect them against the virus, he injects all the doses into his own arm), occurring after the last staircase descent of the film. Thus, the downward movement of the film shows the drop into immoral oblivion.

References
