Interview with Thomas Olde Heuvelt

Madelon Hoedt, University of Huddersfield

In January 2021, I had the pleasure of sitting down with Thomas Olde Heuvelt, the much-acclaimed Dutch author of several novels and many stories of the fantastic, to discuss his work and its themes, as well as questions of translation and international success. His latest novel, *Orakel*, appeared in the Netherlands in March 2021. A new English edition of *HEX* is scheduled for publication in September 2021, with translations of *Echo* and *Orakel* (as *Oracle*) set to follow in February, 2022 and Spring 2023, respectively. This interview serves as a companion piece to the essay *"Soms deed je het vanwege Beek: Surveillance, subversion and the presence of death in Thomas Olde Heuvelt's HEX"*, found elsewhere in this issue.

MH: What do you believe to be the position of the horror genre in the Netherlands? Where did you find your inspiration against a more barren landscape of the fantastic?

We do not really have a tradition of horror fiction in the Netherlands; there is Paul van Loon as an author of children's books, but that is more or less it. I think that is in part due to what I'll call our 'down-to-earthness' and the Calvinist nature of Dutch people. This means that, if you have an interest in everything dark and spooky, you need to look elsewhere. That is what I did when I was growing up: reading translations of Roald Dahl, and then scouring the library for the classics: Dracula, Jekyll and Hyde, and Frankenstein; followed by asking my parents for my first Stephen King novel, which I received at the age of eleven. I figured out pretty quickly that horror is where my interest lies, and what I want to write, but there wasn't an existing market for this type of fiction [in the Netherlands]. Aside from several authors

like Clive Barker, Stephen King, Dean Koontz and Peter Straub, who are a brand in themselves, not a lot of work was being published in translation, and there were no signs of original Dutch-language horror fiction, with the 'thriller' tag being the main way to market these titles. When I started to publish professionally in 2008, my third novel was being advertised as a 'fantasy' novel because, at the time, horror was not seen as marketable.

In recent years, there has been more of a shift, at least in literature: in film, and even in videogames, horror has long had its status as being mainstream and commercially viable. Within fiction, we are seeing this development where genre distinctions are blurring, resulting in more crossover and more acceptance, but it is still a slow process, especially in the Netherlands. The Dutch cultural landscape tends to view literature as elitist, presented with a capital L, distinguishing it from popular fiction, and awarding less status to something like horror. Ultimately, I do not really care about these kinds of labels in relation to my own work: the moment someone is moved by something, that makes it a good story. The novels that stick with you are the ones that make you cry, that make you laugh, that make you think, that frighten you; the ones that elicit all those emotions. Any type of work can make you respond in such a way, whether it is literature, or historical fiction, or romance, or horror fiction, so for me, those genre distinctions and the supposed status they have do not matter very much. When I hear from readers that one of my books has had an impact on them in some way, that is what I find important.

MH: What does horror mean to you? What is the effect you want to evoke in your reader, and how do you use prose to achieve this?

In the first instance, horror is meant to scare you. It is entertainment, and it needs to grab you by the throat. That is the most important thing to me: I want to tell you a scary story that puts you on the edge of your seat; that makes you want to leave the lights on when you go to bed at night. Everything else serves as an addition to that: I studied American Literature at university, so I am interested in reading work that is layered, that uses patterns and themes, where readers can reach their own conclusions about the narrative. Such an approach is something I try to apply to my own writing. *HEX*, for example, is about a small town that is cursed by a witch who was executed some 300 years before, but it is also about the fear of the outsider, the mass hysteria that might result from that fear, and its impact on a community. People tend to be afraid of the unknown, which became a central theme in the novel. Whether readers pick up on that is less important to me: they can look at *HEX* as simply a scary story, or they can interpret it for themselves, finding those deeper meanings, which is the beauty of stories.

My writing style is very visual, so to achieve that sense of horror in prose, I try to appeal to all five senses to help ground the narrative. If I want to engage you, as a reader, and present you with a scene in which supernatural things occur, I need to create that reality first. I need to show you a familiar setting, full of details and sights and sounds that you recognize. Once I have shown you all of that, I can start to introduce the supernatural, and as the story moves forward, that familiarity gets warped, ultimately becoming uncanny and leaving reality behind in favour of the horror. In *Echo*, for example, I tell the story of Nick, whose face is disfigured in a mountaineering accident, which leaves his partner Sam to deal with the repercussions of these events. Everyone knows what it is like to love someone, but what happens if that person is forever altered? What happens if the part of the body that is most recognizable, the face, is hidden behind bandages and surrounded constantly by the scent of

antiseptic cream? These are questions the reader might ask themselves, a situation they can relate to. This is the first step in creating that sense of discomfort, aided by the level of detail I wish to inject in my prose: the way Nick's face looks, the sensation of the bandages, the smell of the medication.

That connection to the familiar is also exemplified by the fact that I am a Dutch author, writing about that culture, and the settings and attitudes that I know so well. I have grown up surrounded by British and American fiction, but my background offers a fresh element to my stories. That is who I am, I cannot change it, and that brings a certain sensibility to the fictional world, to the characters and their actions. When I was writing *HEX*, I was really looking at my own set of cultural references: a small village in the Netherlands, dealing with a curse and the presence of a witch; how would we, as Dutch people, with our pragmatic attitude, deal with that situation? That 'Dutch-ness' impacts on how the situation would play out and gives the story its original slant: what if these people have gotten used to the witch, and are simply dealing with her as if she is part of the furniture? At the same time, they are terrified of her, as she remains an ancient, supernatural, and ultimately incredibly powerful being that runs their lives, keeping them from ever leaving the village until their death. In that sense, *HEX* plays with the universal fear of the unknown, as well as a specific setting adding something new, which is also what attracted the international attention to the book.

MH: Can you tell me about the international success of *HEX*, its translation and the decision-making during that process? How did you translate the 'Dutch-ness' that is so central to the story?

My Dutch editor at the time, Jacques Post, told me that *HEX* could go abroad, but that the novel is so incredibly Dutch that if I wanted it to break into the UK / US market, I would need to consider producing a localized version. In US popular fiction, things need to be recognizable; this is less important in literary fiction, or even in fantasy, which celebrates the sense of discovery and wonder, but with horror, you need the familiarity before you can scare your reader. I made the decision to move ahead with this: to find a location similar to Beek, the village in *HEX*, in terms of geography, climate, and history, which led me to upstate New York. This area has a history of Gothic fiction with authors such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Washington Irving, as well as a link to the early Dutch settlers, allowing me to create a new history for the witch and the origins of the curse.

The translation itself became a very exhaustive process: you need to consider all the names for characters and locations, of course, but then you start to run into a lot of little details, small cultural references, music, brands... For example, there is a scene in the novel where the witch appears inside a cavity wall and is discovered due to the family pet, a dachshund, who keeps barking at the wall in that location. However, this type of construction is not common in that part of the US and had to be changed to a broom cupboard. Alongside these practical considerations, I did want to retain that Dutch-ness, keeping the elements of pragmatism and secularity from the original text, rather than mimicking the notion of small-town America and its religious zeal as found in the fiction of Stephen King.

After that translation was sold, I asked my UK editor about what would have happened if *HEX* did not have the US setting, would the publisher still have bought it, and he was not sure; it was bought based on the translation and the Dutch setting would have made it more difficult to market the book. Similarly, when dealing with other territories, they were offered

the Dutch or US edition for publication and, without fail, they would opt for the translation, from China and Japan to other European countries. This also tells you a little bit about how popular culture, and its focus on the US, is perceived… The process of translating and marketing will be easier going forward; for example, *Echo*, which takes place across several European locations as well as in the Catskills in the US, will not be subject to a similar process of localization.

MH: Many of your works (for example, *HEX, Echo,* and *Dolores Dolly Poppedijn*) can be classified as both horror and love stories, although dealing with different types of love, such as parental and romantic. Can you tell me about your views on the relationship between these emotions?

In our life, the things that affect us most are to do with what we love, and in this way, they also become the source for our greatest fears. Anyone can be scared of spiders, or sharks, or heights, but these are more superficial anxieties; true fear comes from your heart, and from what you are afraid to lose. Love, then, can be an all-encompassing emotion and becomes a possible motivator behind those deeper fears. When we love someone, we are afraid to lose them, and there is a universality to that emotion. Whether that is when you were little, and you had a babysitter, and your mum was not home yet, and you start to worry if something has happened; or whether that is in later life. I was very young when my father died, so that is something that is close to the surface for me: that loss, and the fear to lose more still. Love can be seen as the source of a more universal fear, and thus is suited to stories that deals with those themes.

MH: Yet there is more to this connection between horror and love in your work: in these novels the characters act from love, and in doing so, seem to knowingly lean into the horrors that will result from those actions.

What I am incredibly fascinated by, have been my whole life, is how normal people like you and I can be driven to do the unthinkable. All of us, at one point or another, are likely to experience dark thoughts, but all of us also experience a boundary that we will not cross. What I am interested in is the question as to what makes a certain individual transgress that boundary? In the lives of some people, something happens that takes them to such a dark place and can end in horrible atrocities. For me, it is a scary thought that something like that could happen to you or I. Linking that back to love: the one thing that keeps that boundary in place is rationality, is common sense, but love is not a rational emotion. Love does not remove that boundary, but it introduces a potentially slippery slope; when something happens to someone you love, it can blur the rational thought that stops you from acting out, as it were. What might be the point that something pushes you enough that you *do* cross that line into irrational action? It is a feeling many of us will recognize, where love can act as a strong catalyst to bring someone to such an extreme. As such, it can be fertile ground for the motivations of characters in horror fiction.

MH: What do categories such as death, ghosts and haunting mean to you, and how do they appear in your fiction?

Personally, I do not believe in the existence of ghosts. I have a very scientific mind and approach, and although I would love to see evidence of the paranormal, that is not yet the case: too much of the current 'proof' lies in secondary stories, or in manifestations that have an alternative explanation. Yet, there is an irrational part of me that has that fear. I live near woodland, and when I go out for a night-time walk, I am not scared of being attacked or robbed, but I am afraid of what *else* might be out there: a crying baby; a phantasm with long hair covering its face emerging from between the trees… That fear has been with me since I was young, and I have often wondered about its origins. On a surface level, I have been lucky enough to grow up with ghost stories, told by my grandfather and uncle, who read books to me such as Dracula when I was very young, or told me stories of local legends when we went out hiking. More importantly, the death of my father has been a part of this, simply the possibility that someone who is so important is suddenly no longer there, and the way their absence impacts on every aspect of your life. Because of this, Death became something very real, very tangible: my view of Death, then, was of something physical, something that lived in a dark corner of our attic, and that could get me if I made too much noise downstairs, because it might hear me. Death, for me, was anthropomorphic, a material being. More generally, the idea that something can happen in your life, that you can be confronted by some gruesome image or event that stays with you, especially as a child, is something that continues to haunt you. Ultimately, haunting is always a symbol for our own memories that keep returning to us. The dead cannot haunt us; instead, it is our own thoughts and ideas that stick around to keep us awake.

MH: In *HEX* and *Echo*, in particular, you identify a clash between the old and the new, the ancient intruding on modern society. Could you tell me about your views on this theme in horror, and the role it plays in your fiction?

I love for my work to be contemporary, for my stories to take place in our modern context, yet this coexists with my interest in the supernatural and, allied with that, older forces of nature. The theme of mountaineering in *Echo* is rooted in my personal experience as an alpinist, and the sensation of each mountain possessing its own soul as discussed in the novel. In some ways, that experience ties in with older, pagan beliefs, of monks and shamans finding religious visions in such places. I am not as interested in the religious side of this, but I do feel drawn to the idea of those forces, the presence of the ancient, still forming a backdrop to our technologically advanced society. Mostly, I am interested in the contrast between the ancient and the modern, and to have that contemporaneity in my narratives, while knowing full well that my 'contemporary' stories will appear dated in ten, twenty years. I see them as a reflection of the here and now, and what our current lives look like, including how those lives might relate to those older forces.

MH: In response to that contrast, even conflict, your characters make many attempts to exert control over these forces, both through the use of technology and more traditional, even pagan, means.

In some ways, I think we, as humans, are closer to those beliefs than we might think, or might like to think. We only have to look at the past year and the COVID-19 pandemic, in response to which we find some people putting together the most complex conspiracy theories. This

ties back to my earlier point on the fear of the unknown, of the outsider, which in this case is a virus. None of us have ever experienced anything like this in our lifetime, and people are frightened. The result of this is that people may listen to their gut more than their rational side, and when you add a set of rules into the mix, whether in real life as a response to managing a virus, or in the fictional setting of *HEX* as a response to managing a witch and a curse, it is the emotion and the fear that will govern their actions and beliefs. It is something that happens in the novel, but it is also something we can see happening around us right now. The contrast between modernity and tradition could also be said to exist as part of an older cultural frame, where people were more likely to follow the rules, whereas younger generations may be more critical about such a situation. At the same time, those traditions never wholly disappear, as is portrayed in *HEX*, where folk beliefs continue to survive and are observed by the older and younger residents of Beek alike.

The need that the characters feel to try and control the supernatural is something that stems from my own experiences. I recognize that I have wanted control elements of my life, as without that control, there is room for uncertainty and for outcomes that might be unsettling. Although all of us learn as we get older that this is simply impossible, the inability to exert that level of control will also create a level of friction, insecurity, and indeed fear. Similar to our experience of love, the wish to have control over one's life and the events that we cannot influence, such as the loss of a loved one, that sensation is more or less universal, and can act as a catalyst for fear.

MH: Technology is important in *HEX* and *Echo* as both theme and narrative device. How do you view the place of new technologies in horror fiction, as well as your choice to integrate these advances into your work?

As a contemporary author, you need to be consider the role of technology. I think it was R.L. Stine who said that since the widespread adoption of the smartphone, horror as a genre is effectively ruined, because you can no longer be isolated, and there will always some way to call for help. I find that somewhat reductive as it merely changes the challenge for the writer in finding ways to incorporate that technology. I do not wish to frame technology as some kind of evil force, as something which harms us, since it is part of our everyday lives. What it does introduce is the need to think more creatively, to either sidestep the restrictions that these devices add to the narrative, or to find original ways in which technology can aid in enhancing horror, and I feel that modern technology is actually well-suited for that purpose. For example, in my new novel *Orakel*, the main character, Luca Wolf, is being monitored by the secret services. He knows he has been watched for a while and is pretty sure that his phone is being tracked, which leads him to question how he might dispose of it, adding to the tension surrounding that character and how he deals with the situation. Similarly, in *Echo*, when Nick is climbing in Switzerland, he makes camp on the side of a mountain and comments on the lack of reception there, something which has not really been a problem, even at higher altitudes. This comment highlights the otherworldliness of the location where he finds himself, and introduces the supernatural element tied to this particular mountain, from which the horror of the narrative emerges. What was relatively normal in previous decades, the idea of being disconnected, of not being near a phone, has now became uncanny in its own right as it is not something we experience very often, leaving us without the safety net of being able to simply ring someone. That is something, as an author, that you need to

navigate and either incorporate or circumvent, depending on the narrative; better yet, you embrace it as the breeding ground of fresh, contemporary horror stories!

In *HEX*, technology is also used as an homage, in particular to the found footage genre and its ability to frame or obscure reality. *The Blair Witch Project*, for example, used its notion of truth and proof as presented by raw footage as a main component in its marketing. Of course, this has now been repeated, and is perhaps less effective, if only because we have become familiar with that setup. I am not necessarily a fan of found footage, yet I do enjoy engaging with wider horror culture in my fiction, adding that layer of meta-horror. This is most obvious in *Echo*, which openly references classic works of horror in chapter titles and through direct quotations, as well as more poetic allusions, such the cabin where Nick and Same stay upon returning to Switzerland being referred to as Hill House. In *HEX*, the incorporation of the found footage aesthetic, of telling key moments of the story through, quite literally, the lens of a camera, aids in emphasizing that idea of truth and evidence that we know from those films creating a particular understanding of what might be real for the reader, and for the characters, who are experiencing these events.

This connection to the 'real', for me, finds its origins with Stephen King in his use of pop culture references, which helps to ground his fiction. It is that approach which makes the setting so familiar, and the horror all the more unsettling as a result, and it is one I find very persuasive. In that sense, it is something I try to bring to my work, by using a contemporary, recognizable setting, but also through using a certain narrative frame: part of *Orakel* has appeared on my website, redressed as a piece of journalism, and in the afterword of *HEX*, I tell readers how they can visit Beek, which is a real town, even if a certain amount of creative license was involved in how it appeared on the page. All of this adds that little edge of

reality; I can show that these places exist, and for the reader, it plants that little seed that maybe, just maybe, these events really could happen.