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HORROR

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Three questions have occupied much of the philosophical literature on cinematic horror: What is horror? How is it able to frighten and disgust? Why do we seek out horror if it horrifies? Although there are numerous other important topics, this entry will focus on these three general questions, since they motivate the overwhelming majority of the philosophical writing on cinematic horror.

What is horror?

In attempting to answer the question “What is horror?” many authors have pursued the goal of providing a definition of the genre. Although it would be something of a miracle if we could come up with a classical definition of any genre (comprising necessary and jointly sufficient conditions), especially of one as varied as horror, the task has not been unfruitful. Noël Carroll, in *Paradoxes of the Heart*, offers a definition of horror that has been the subject of sustained controversy. Carroll’s definition, roughly, is that a work should be classified as horror if it attempts to arouse fear and disgust directed at a monster, which he defines as a threatening creature not thought to exist by current science (Carroll 1990). It is important to note that Carroll’s definition is centered on monsters. It is not enough for a work to merely arouse fear and disgust, as many slasher movies do; the fear and disgust must be directed at a monster. Given the further restrictions on what counts as a monster, this condition puts severe limitations on what can count as horror proper.

The second part of Carroll’s definition concerns the nature of monsters. Carroll argues that to count as a horror monster the creature must be acknowledged not to exist according to contemporary science (Carroll 1990: 27). It is probably best to cash out “contemporary science” as the science in the world of the fiction, which typically maps onto or exceeds the science of the actual world, since we would not want the horror fiction of the past to become medical drama, if, say, biologists learn to revivify corpses. Regardless, this conception of “monster” has been thought to cause the most trouble for Carroll’s definition. There are a few problems, most of which Carroll addresses directly.

The central issue is that this characterization of monsters is too restrictive. One particularly troubling case is that of Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960). Although we might

want to classify *Psycho* as a horror film, since it does not fit as cleanly into any other category, according to Carroll's criterion the movie lacks a monster and is thereby not a horror film. Psychopaths, such as Mark Lewis in *Peeping Tom* (Michael Powell, 1960) and Norman Bates in *Psycho*, are certainly acknowledged by science – they are not supernatural in any way – so they do not count as monsters in the strict sense. Carroll raises both of these cases as potential objections to his definition. In reply he argues that Norman is the exception that proves the rule: we are tempted to count Norman as a monster, since he shares so many attributes with genuine monsters, but he is not technically a monster. However, not everyone has been satisfied with the result: *Psycho* still does not count as horror according to Carroll's definition.

In *The Naked and the Undead*, Cynthia Freeland eschews the task of coming up with a formal definition for the genre, citing similar problems with Carroll's definition. Instead Freeland operates with the looser notion that horror is involved in exploring various forms of evil (Freeland 2000). We might be tempted to construct a revised notion of Carroll's definition, altering what it means to be a monster, by using a crude version of Freeland's criterion: monsters are evil. Although our new definition would certainly include *Psycho*, it would make the definition far too inclusive. *Goodfellas* (Scorsese, 1990), for instance, would be horror if we tried to construct a definition of monster based on this criterion, since many of the characters are unambiguously evil. Similarly, *The Sopranos* would count as horror under a theory that considered evil beings monsters.

Robert Yanal points out these potential difficulties with the evil theory of monsters and offers a third definition in response (Yanal 2003). Yanal's idea is inspired by Aristotle's discussion in the *Metaphysics* of a creature that fails to achieve its natural end. Aristotle's principal example is an ox with a human face, evincing the kind of categorical interstitiality that most monsters possess. We need not spend much time spelling out Yanal's proposal, since it is obviously underinclusive. Although Yanal's criterion may allow for Norman Bates, there are many kinds of monsters that have horrific natures. Hence, the problem is not that demons and aliens with acidic blood have failed to realize their natural ends that makes them into monsters; quite the opposite: these creatures are terrifying precisely because they have so effectively realized their horrific natures.

Given the problems that we have encountered in defining the genre, we are warranted in suspecting that it may not be possible to formulate an acceptable definition of horror that will map onto current usage. For the sake of argument, assume that it is acceptable, as I think it is, that *Psycho* would not count as horror proper according to Carroll's definition. This is only the tip of the iceberg: there are many other cases of what we often call horror that do not come close to meeting Carroll's criteria. For instance, slasher films would not count, even though the slasher movie is widely considered a horror subgenre. Some may find this consequence acceptable, but it points out that the definition is somewhat stipulative. And we have no reason to think that any nonstipulative definition could be created, since the borders of genres are just not neat enough to admit of classical definitions. Although a definition of the genre that meets our common usage might not be forthcoming, we might be able

to provide a definition of a particular type of horror, perhaps even the paradigmatic type, and I think this is what Carroll has likely done. But one may still question the value of the entire definitional project. And, of course, the value of the project must be evident in its results: Having a definition has allowed Carroll to develop a theory of the appeal of horror, classify various common plot structures, and to explain why this type of horror is so effective. Narrowing the focus with a somewhat stipulative definition has made the related problems more manageable.

Fearing monsters

Why are vampires, werewolves, and other assorted horror monsters frightening for audiences that deny believing in such supernatural creatures? To appreciate the answers to this question, we must first look at a closely related puzzle. How are horror movies able to horrify when we are perfectly aware that what we are watching is fiction? We know that there is no such person as Marion Crane who is about to be stabbed by Norman Bates and no poolside party of teenagers about to be ripped to shreds by Freddy Kruger, but we are scared nonetheless. This puzzle is known as the paradox of fiction, which boils down to the question of how it is that we respond to fictional scenarios with genuine emotions (Radford 1975 and 1995).

It seems plausible to say that emotional responses require belief in the reality of their objects. To see why, consider this scenario: Imagine that you are at lunch with an old friend that you have not talked to in a while. Over the course of the meal, he describes in great detail how his wife of many years recently died after a painful battle with cancer. It is not controversial to think that you might feel sorry for your friend, depressed, and perhaps distraught. After paying the check, on the way out your friend tells you that he's been "pulling your leg" and that his wife, alive and healthy, would like to meet for drinks later. In this situation you might be angry with your friend: had you known that his wife was alive and well, it seems that you would not have felt painful sympathy for your friend, or so we assume (Carroll 1990). But knowing that many fictional narratives are merely make-believe has no dampening effect on our emotional responses.

Accordingly, Kendall Walton asks if an imagined horror fan named Charles is genuinely afraid of the Green Slime, or if perhaps Charles is only experiencing make-believe or pretend fear (Walton 1978). The "thought theory" is another compelling resolution to the paradox (Carroll 1990; Lamarque 1981). Carroll develops his version of the thought theory in reaction to both illusion and pretend theories. Unlike the pretend theorist such as Walton, Carroll argues that there is no reason to suppose that the emotions we feel in reaction to fictions are any less genuine than other real-life emotions. Contrary to the illusion theorists, who argue that a measure of belief in the reality of the fiction is necessary for emotional response, Carroll presents a thought theory, which states that "thought contents we entertain without believing them can genuinely move us emotionally" (Carroll 1990: 81). Given the plausibility of the analogy between our imaginative involvement with fictions that we create, in cases like those where we imagine the sudden death of a loved one, and our engagement

with fictions not of our own construction, the thought theory is an incredibly intuitive, high-level account of how it is possible to be moved by fictions.

However, a complete explanation of our imaginative engagement with fictions will require, at least, an account of the role of belief. Perhaps the most fundamental questions about how we understand fictions are these: What beliefs must readers bring to fictions and how are they able to do it? No fiction could ever specify all the information required for even the most basic comprehension. For instance, Shakespeare did not have to specify that Hamlet has two eyes, a heart, and two kidneys. We bring to fictions a tremendous amount of beliefs about the world, genres, and the norms of the work's contemporaries.

There are obvious limits on the efficacy of the thoughts viewers are willing to entertain; and within the range of acceptable fictional situations, there are those that viewers will less readily consider and ones that effectively provoke strong responses. Carroll gives an example of a person standing stably near the edge of a cliff, in no danger of falling, but able to become frightened by thinking about dropping off. He argues that it is not the belief that we are about to fall that makes us scared, since we do not have that belief, but the mere thought of falling that provokes the fear response. However, one could argue, and the thought theorist could consistently agree, that the reaction to this thought scenario is highly influenced by various beliefs. We do not hold the one particular belief that Carroll mentions; however, we do believe (in the strong sense of the term) a great number of trivial things such as that things fall, that I can fall, that I could get hurt if I fall from high up. Thoughts about flying upward uncontrollably and hitting your head on the ceiling are less likely to scare you than they are to make you laugh, since the supporting beliefs are not available (Smuts 2003).

A useful test of the comprehensiveness of any theory of the imagination is to ask whether it explains why we are willing to entertain certain ideas and not others. Why are some thoughts so much more effective at arousing emotional responses than others? At a minimum, emotional response is both primed and partially constrained by our web of potentially acceptable beliefs, however minor they may seem. Though viewers do not have to confuse fiction and reality, the imagination cannot run wild and still pull the emotions, but serves best when fed by acceptable scenarios backed by supporting beliefs. It is common to hear people criticize a film by saying "It just wasn't believable. I couldn't get into it."

But just what kinds of supporting beliefs are optimal for horror viewing? Some psychoanalytically inclined theorists have attempted to explain the effectiveness of horror by recourse to Freud's theory of the uncanny (Freud 1953). Roughly, Freud argues that one experiences the uncanny when one recalls a repressed or surmounted belief that seems to be confirmed. In one of the more compelling psychoanalytic accounts, Steven Jay Schneider argues that horror monsters can be seen as metaphorical examples of repressed beliefs and desires (Schneider 2000). Although the effectiveness of some monsters might be attributable to repressed beliefs, there is no reason to think that repression funds most of the products of the genre. The uncanny is nearly the exclusive providence of the fantastic, where a supernatural explanation for the events

in the fiction is tenuous. And there is some debate as to whether the fantastic should count as horror proper. What plausible repressed belief does the killer, mutant sea monster in *The Host* (John-ho Bong, 2006) represent, for instance? Although there is certainly more to be said about the role of the uncanny in the effectiveness of horror, there might be a more general way to explore the role of belief in the effectiveness of horror that does not carry with it psychoanalytic baggage, by focusing on surmounted rather than repressed beliefs.

In fact, based on a common response differential, a case can be made that audience reactions to some horror fictions provide evidence that they hold beliefs in the supernatural. A great deal of horror fiction is cross-culturally portable, that is, it is effective for audiences across the globe. However, much of the most effective horror fiction produced in the West is ineffective on those raised outside a Judeo-Christian culture. Many of my friends from India and China do not find *The Omen* (Donner, 1976) or *The Exorcist* (Friedkin, 1973) to be effective as horror movies, but these films are largely thought to be eerie, horrifying, and disturbing in the West. Similarly, I do not know many Americans who find the bouncing vampires in Japanese horror scary. What is particularly interesting about the situation is that the divide seems to work for even those who profess no religious beliefs. The apparent difference in effectiveness begs for an explanation.

One explanation of why *The Exorcist* is not scary for Buddhists is that the religious lore and mythology upon which the fiction draws is not familiar to those raised outside a Christian culture. If you are not familiar with the notion of possession by evil Latin-speaking spirits, then it might be difficult to become immersed in the story. However, this explanation radically overestimates the complexity of the folklore. Any audience can be brought up to speed and made fluent in the superstitions of a culture in minutes. I understand the properties of slow bouncing vampires, but they are not scary to me. Similarly, it is pretty simple to explain that in the world of *The Exorcist* there are powerful forces of good and evil; ancient evil spirits sometimes possess the bodies of humans; and Catholic priests are brought in to dispel the spirits when this happens. Overall, the situation is not very complicated and most of the subtleties are explained during the movie.

The difference in responses most plausibly has to do with our long-term affective inculcation into the mythology of our culture. It is uncontroversial to note that a few important things happen when we are immersed in a mythological tradition, things relevant to the effectiveness of some horror fictions. First of all, we become experienced in the mythology. It is not just that we understand a great deal about vampires and spirit possession, but that each subsequent vampire we encounter inherits something from those that came before. Monsters get a reputation, so to speak. This reputation undoubtedly contributes to their effectiveness. However, the reputation-building is not decisive: no matter how many times I encounter a bouncing vampire, they will never be terrifying monsters for me.

The second important thing that happens when we are immersed in a culture's mythology is that we develop beliefs. In the West, we can expect children to develop beliefs in vampires, werewolves, ghosts, evil spirits, zombies, and witches. This is not

an outlandish claim. Just think of how many children will assent to a belief in Santa Claus, not to mention a variety of other magical beings. Similarly, there are few *de facto* atheists. Most atheists pass through an early stage of belief only to actively reject the religious tradition in which they were raised. Freud argues that “It seems as if each one of us has been through a phase of individual development corresponding to this animistic stage in primitive men” (Freud 1953). Assuming that such claims are plausible, one may wonder what the beliefs of children have to do with the effectiveness of horror on adults who deny believing in werewolves, ghosts, vampires, daemons, witches, and their kin.

Although we may not profess a belief in superstitions when the propositions are made occurrent, our responses to such fictions suggest that – like school children – many of us do indeed harbor beliefs, albeit partial, in the supernatural. It may seem as if this claim oversteps the evidence – the differential response – but an extremely plausible account can be given for how it is that rational adults could hold such beliefs. Simply put, it is not easy to shake off the kinds of beliefs that many of us develop as children. In fact, many Americans never shed their schoolyard superstitions. The reason these kinds of beliefs are so prevalent is due to a fundamental dissimilarity between believing in something and believing that something does not exist. Beliefs that things do not exist are easily corrected; all we have to do is see the thing. I might not believe that flying snakes exist, but show me one and I’ll be converted to a believer in flying snakes. However, beliefs that things do exist are much harder to vanquish, since it is typically impossible to prove that something does not exist. How exactly would you get someone to stop believing in flying snakes? Needless to say, it would be much harder than proving that they exist.

The response differential between acculturated and nonacculturated audiences is not the only reason to think that horror fictions might be making use of audience beliefs in the supernatural. Many horror fictions enact a belief-revival process through the presence of a skeptical character. As Carroll has identified, one common horror plot structure involves the discovery and confirmation of the existence of a monster prior to its confrontation (Carroll 1990). Typically an extremely skeptical character, often in the guise of a scientist, will belittle accounts of the monster. Not only do skeptics end up converted, but often they are the first to die, as they are the least prepared to deal with a genuine threat. John Carpenter’s *Prince of Darkness* (1987) follows a similar pattern. A group of physicists, mostly graduate students from Berkeley, are asked to investigate a mysterious canister locked away in the basement of a Catholic church. One of the students, a cocky Asian, repeatedly makes jokes about their assignment. Eventually it is revealed that the canister is filled with liquid Satan. Not only does the skeptical cut-up come to believe in the presence of Satan, he is one of the first characters to be dispatched by the dark lord’s minions. The skeptic in horror fiction serves to chip away at the doubting audiences’ certainty for the course of the fiction.

But, as with the psychoanalytic approach, the latent supernatural belief model has limited applicability. Many horror movies involve monsters that have little or no cultural funding, but the monsters are still frightening. Again, consider *The Host*

(John-ho Bong, 2006): the giant squid was largely unprecedented and audiences certainly did not have any latent beliefs in such creatures, but the monster was terrifying nonetheless. This should give us serious pause before claiming that any particular horror monster is effective because of latent audience beliefs in the supernatural.

The appeal of horror

Traditionally, the question of why people seek out experiences of putatively painful art has been presented as the paradox of tragedy, and recently, Carroll has introduced a related problem known as the paradox of horror. Both the paradox of tragedy and the paradox of horror arise as soon as we ask the question, why do people seek out or desire to see horror films or watch tragedies? More specifically, we might ask, why do people want to be scared by a movie or feel pity for a character when they avoid situations in real life that arouse the same emotions? An adequate solution to either problem will most likely require genre-specific considerations. However, the paradoxes of tragedy and horror are not simply questions about why people desire to see works in these genres: a question is not by itself a paradox. As they are typically stated, the two paradoxes ask how it is possible for audiences to feel pleasure at a horror movie or a tragedy.

If we do not assume that people derive pleasure from tragedy or that pleasure must be the sole motive for art experiences, the paradox of tragedy can be given a more general form that we can call the paradox of painful art. The paradox of painful art can be stated as follows:

- 1 People do not typically seek out situations that arouse painful emotions.
- 2 People have painful emotions in response to some art.
- 3 People routinely seek out art that they know will arouse painful emotions.

Since horror arouses fear and disgust, two reactions that are typically aversive, it maps neatly onto the paradox of painful art.

To clarify the various debates on the topic, it must be noted that there are two related questions that need to be answered. First, why is it that people seek out putatively painful art in general? And, second, why do people want to experience horror fiction in particular? We might be able to provide a perfectly general answer in resolution to the paradox of painful art without answering the horror-specific question. In evaluating answers to the second question, we must consider its explanatory scope. A theory might have universal application across the horror genre, or it might have a more limited explanatory domain, limited to, say, haunted house fictions. It is unclear how much weight should be given to scope when evaluating a solution to the paradox.

As to the first question, there are numerous competing accounts of how the paradox of painful art might be resolved. Control theorists argue that the putative painfulness of some artworks is mitigated by our ability to stop experiencing them at will (Morreall 1985). Compensation theorists argue that any painful reactions must be compensated

for by other pleasures or values, either in the craft of the narrative (Hume 1985) or in the awareness that we are sympathetic creatures responsive to the suffering of others (Feagin 1983). Conversion theorists argue that the overall experience of painful artworks is not one of pain but of pleasure, as the pain is converted into a larger, more pleasurable experience (Hume 1985). Power theorists argue that we enjoy the feeling of power that arises from either the realization of the endurance of humanity (Price 1998), or through the overcoming of our fear (Shaw 2001). Rich-experience theorists argue that there are many reasons why people do things other than to feel pleasure. The overall experience of painful art may be unpleasant, but the experience can still be seen as valuable, and, as such, motivating (Smuts 2007).

As to the horror-specific question, some deny that horror fictions, unlike tragedy, do provide painful experiences that need special explanation (Neil 1992). In fact, we seek out horror fictions precisely for the combination of fear and disgust that Carroll calls art horror. But there are corresponding offerings that typically map onto one of the competing accounts of our desire to experience painful art. For instance, Carroll presents a compensatory theory, arguing that the reason why audiences seek out horror fictions, knowing full well that they will experience fear and disgust, is for the compensatory cognitive pleasures. Audiences, on Carroll's account, enjoy thinking about how one should go about confronting categorically interstitial monsters. The experience of horror is the "price we are willing to pay" for the pleasures of discovery (Carroll 1990: 186). This would explain why so many horror plots are structured in a four-stage model – onset, discovery, confirmation, confrontation. Carroll's explanation is intended to account for the appeal of narrative horror, but he also offers a curiosity-based account of nonnarrative works of horrific art.

Although there are certainly forms of pleasure available from the discovery plot structure, some would argue that Carroll's explanation leaves too much out, namely, the pleasures of identification with monsters (Shaw 2001). Daniel Shaw argues that horror fictions are often enjoyable because they allows audiences to identify both with a monster as it dispatches the more annoying teenagers, and with the victims, who often ultimately triumphant (Shaw 2001). Since the notion of character identification is suspect (Carroll 1990; Gaut 1999), we might want to revise the claim to state that audiences sympathize with or admire the monster. Shaw's principal example is Hannibal Lecter in *Silence of the Lambs* (Demme, 1999), whose cunning and wit bring him into sympathy with the audience. Elsewhere, Shaw argues that typical monster movies can encourage similar responses from audiences enamored with a killer's powers of destruction (Shaw 1997). Although Shaw's theory is intriguing and highlights an extremely important feature of the appeal of horror, it has yet to be worked out across a broad spectrum of the genre. But, yes, we can agree that some horror fictions are enjoyable because we like to see monsters vanquish their prey. Carroll's general reply to this line of argument (Hallie 1969), is that it has only limited applicability (Carroll 1990: 167–8). Perhaps the ferocity of the zombies in *28 Days Later* (Boyle, 2002) might arouse such reactions, but the slow masses of dumb walking corpses in *Night of the Living Dead* (Romero, 1968) certainly do not.

Many of the answers to the paradox of horror are simultaneously answers to the

question addressed in the previous section, that is, what makes horror so effective? For instance, most Freudian accounts attempt to explain both how it is that horror fictions frighten us and why we desire such experiences. Robin Wood argues that repressed desires – Oedipal and homosexual – drive much of the fear one experiences, while the punishment of transgression, affirming the normal moral order, is a source of much of the pleasure (Wood 1982). Similarly, fellow Freudian, Carol Clover argues that female sexuality arouses fear that is vanquished in pleasurable scenes where “loose” women are punished (Clover 1992). Psychoanalytic stories can be fleshed out into highly persuasive accounts of the appeal of horror, explaining the prominence of certain themes found in much of contemporary horror. However, such explanations are typically unparsonic, have difficulty explaining the attraction of horror to female audiences, and rest on the suspect foundation of psychoanalysis.

In one of the more popular accounts of the appeal of horror, Lovecraft argues that people enjoy horror, roughly because it allows them to combat scientific materialism and to engage in feelings of cosmic awe. One could construct a Lovecraft-inspired resolution to the paradox as follows: horror provides something of a religious experience that helps alleviate the deadening effects of living in a scientific culture. The feeling of awe compensates for whatever negative reactions one might experience while fearing the unknown. Clearly, such an explanation would be very limited, since the bulk of the horror genre fails to inspire anything close to awe. For instance, Freddy Krueger inspires nothing similar to awe, and neither do Romero’s clumsy zombies. Nevertheless, given the variability of the genre one suspects that the most compelling answers to “Why horror?” will have a limited scope – explaining the appeal of a certain type of horror movie rather than of the entire genre.

See also Emotion and affect (Chapter 8), Empathy and character engagement (Chapter 9), Genre (Chapter 14), Violence (Chapter 26), and Noël Carroll (Chapter 31).

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