

Why horror?

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There is a theoretical question about horror which, although not unique to horror, nevertheless is not one that readily arises with respect to other popular genres, such as mystery, romance, comedy, the thriller, adventure stories, and the western. The question is: why would anyone be interested in the genre to begin with? Why does the genre persist? I have written a lot about the internal elements of the genre; but many readers may feel that in doing that their attention has been deflected away from the central issue concerning horror—viz., how can we explain its very existence, for why would anyone *want* to be horrified, or even art-horrified?

This question, moreover, becomes especially pressing if my analysis of the nature of horror is accepted. For we have seen that a key element in the emotion of art-horror is repulsion or disgust. But—and this is the question of “Why horror?” in its primary form—if horror necessarily has something repulsive about it, how can audiences be attracted to it? Indeed, even if horror only caused fear, we might feel justified in demanding an explanation of what could motivate people to seek out the genre. But where fear is compounded with repulsion, the ante is, in a manner of speaking, raised.

In the ordinary course of affairs, people shun what disgusts them. Being repulsed by something that one finds to be loathsome and impure is an unpleasant experience. We do not, for example, attempt to add some pleasure to a boring afternoon by opening the lid of a steamy trash can in order to savor its unwholesome stew of broken bits of meat, moldering fruits and vegetables, and noxious, unrecognizable clumps, riven thoroughly by all manner of crawling things. And, ordinarily, checking out hospital waste bags is not our idea of a good time. But, on the other hand, many people—so many, in fact, that we must concede that they are normal, at least in the statistical sense—do seek out horror fictions for the purpose of deriving pleasure from sights and descriptions that customarily repulse them.

In short, there appears to be something paradoxical about the horror genre. It obviously attracts consumers; but it seems to do so by means of the expressly repulsive. Furthermore, the horror genre gives every evidence of being pleasurable to its audience, but it does so by means of trafficking in the very sorts of things that cause disquiet, distress, and displeasure. So different ways of clarifying the question “Why horror?” are to ask: “Why are horror audiences attracted by what, typically (in everyday life), should (and would) repel them?,” or “How can horror audiences find pleasure in what by nature is distressful and unpleasant?”

In what follows, I will attempt to find a comprehensive or general answer to the question of what attracts audiences to the horror genre. That is, I shall try to frame a set of hypotheses that will supply a plausible explanation of the attracting power of horror in its many manifestations across the different centuries and decades, and across the different subgenres and media in which horror is practiced. However, in this regard it is important to emphasize that, though a general account of horror may be advanced, this does not preclude the possibility that it can be supplemented by additional accounts of why a particular horror novel or film, a particular horror subgenre, or a particular cycle within the history of horror also has some special levers of attraction over and above those that are generic to the mode of horror. That is, an explanation of basic pleasures or attractions of the horror mode is compatible with *additional* explanations of why, for example, *Rosemary's Baby* exercises its own particular fascination; of how werewolf stories, while sharing the allures of ghost stories and other horrific tales, have allures of their own; and of why horror cycles, like the Hollywood movie cycle of the thirties, gain attractive power by thematically developing concerns of especial appropriateness for the period in which they were made.

A general theory of horror will say something about the probable roots of attraction and pleasure throughout the genus of horror, but this does not deny that various of the species and specimens of the genre will have further sources of attraction and pleasure that will require, correspondingly, *added* explanations. In most cases, such (added) explanations will be developed by critics of the genre. However, I would like to address one particular case here which is especially relevant to readers of this book. In concluding, I will attempt an account of why at present horror is so compelling, that is, an account of why the horror cycle within which we find ourselves exerts such a commanding impression on its continuing, avid audiences: that is to say on us (or at least many of us).

[. . .]

I think it is fair to say that in our culture, horror thrives above all as a narrative form. Thus, in order to account for the interest we take in and the pleasure we take from horror, we may hypothesize that, in the main, the locus of our gratification is not the monster as such but the whole narrative structure in which the presentation of the monster is staged. This, of course, is not to say that the monster is in any way irrelevant to the genre, nor that the interest and pleasure in the genre could be satisfied through and/or substituted by any old narrative. For, as I have argued earlier, the monster is a functional ingredient in the type of narratives found in horror stories, and not all narratives function exactly like horror narratives.

As we saw in my analysis of horror narratives, these stories, with great frequency, revolve around proving, disclosing, discovering, and confirming the existence of something that is impossible, something that defies standing conceptual schemes. It is part of such stories—contrary to our everyday beliefs about the nature of things—that such monsters exist. And as a result, audiences' expectations revolve around whether this existence will be confirmed in the story.

Often this is achieved, as Hume says of narrative "secrets" in general, by putting off the conclusive information that the monster exists for quite a while. Sometimes this information may be deferred till the very end of the fiction. And even where this information is given to the audience right off the bat, it is still generally the case that the human characters in the tale must undergo a process of discovering that the monster exists, which, in turn, may lead to a further process of confirming that discovery in an ensuing scene or series of scenes. That

is, the question of whether or not the monster exists may be transformed into the question of whether and when the human characters in the tale will establish the existence of the monster. Horror stories are often protracted series of discoveries: first the reader learns of the monster's existence, then some characters do, then some more characters do, and so on; the drama of iterated disclosure—albeit to different parties—underwrites much horror fiction.¹

Even in overreacher plots, there is a question of whether the monsters exist—i.e., of whether they can be summoned, in the case of demons, or of whether they can be created by mad scientists and necromancers. Furthermore, even after the existence of the monster is disclosed, the audience continues to crave further information about its nature, its identity, its origin, its purposes, and its astounding powers and properties, including, ultimately, those of its weaknesses that *may* enable humanity to do it in.

Thus, to a large extent, the horror story is driven explicitly by curiosity. It engages its audience by being involved in processes of disclosure, discovery, proof, explanation, hypothesis, and confirmation. Doubt, skepticism, and the fear that belief in the existence of the monster is a form of insanity are predictable foils to the revelation (to the audience or to the characters or both) of the existence of the monster.

Horror stories, in a significant number of cases, are dramas of proving the existence of the monster and disclosing (most often gradually) the origin, identity, purposes and powers of the monster. Monsters, as well, are obviously a perfect vehicle for engendering this kind of curiosity and for supporting the drama of proof, because monsters are (physically, though generally not logically) impossible beings. They arouse interest and attention through being putatively inexplicable or highly unusual vis-à-vis our standing cultural categories, thereby instilling a desire to learn and to know about them. And since they are also outside of (justifiably) prevailing definitions of what is, they understandably prompt a need for proof (or the fiction of a proof) in the face of skepticism. Monsters are, then, natural subjects for curiosity, and they straightforwardly warrant the ratiocinative energies the plot lavishes upon them.

All narratives might be thought to involve the desire to know—the desire to know at least the outcome of the interaction of the forces made salient in the plot. However, the horror fiction is a special variation on this general narrative motivation, because it has at the center of it something which is given as in principle *unknowable*—something which, *ex hypothesi*, cannot, given the structure of our conceptual scheme, exist and that cannot have the properties it has. This is why, so often, the real drama in a horror story resides in establishing the existence of the monster and in disclosing its horrific properties. Once this is established, the monster, generally, has to be confronted, and the narrative is driven by the question of whether the creature can be destroyed. However, even at this point, the drama of ratiocination can continue as further discoveries—accompanied by arguments, explanations, and hypotheses—reveal features of the monster that will facilitate or impede the destruction of the creature. [. . .]

What is revealed and disclosed, of course, are monsters and their properties. These are appropriate objects of discovery and revelation, just because they are unknown—not only in the sense that the murderer in a detective fiction is unknown, but also because they are outside the bounds of knowledge, i.e., outside our standing conceptual schemes. This, as well, accounts for why their revelation and the disclosure of their properties is so often bound up in processes of proof, hypothesis, argument, explanation (including sci-fi flights of fancy and

magical lore about mythological realms, potions, and incantations), and confirmation. That is, because horror fictions are predicated on the revelation of unknown and unknowable—unbelievable and incredible—impossible beings, they often take the form of narratives of discovery and proof. For things unknown in the way of monsters obviously are natural subjects for proof.

Applied to the paradox of horror, these observations suggest that the pleasure derived from the horror fiction and the source of our interest in it resides, first and foremost, in the processes of discovery, proof, and confirmation that horror fictions often employ. The disclosure of the existence of the horrific being and of its properties is the central source of pleasure in the genre; once that process of revelation is consummated, we remain inquisitive about whether such a creature can be successfully confronted, and that narrative question sees us through to the end of the story. Here, the pleasure involved is, broadly speaking, cognitive. Hobbes, interestingly, thought of curiosity as an appetite of the mind; with the horror fiction, that appetite is whetted by the prospect of knowing the putatively unknowable, and then satisfied through a continuous process of revelation, enhanced by imitations of (admittedly simplistic) proofs, hypotheses, counterfeits of causal reasoning, and explanations whose details and movement intrigue the mind in ways analogous to genuine ones.²

Moreover, it should be clear that these particular cognitive pleasures, insofar as they are set in motion by the relevant kind of unknowable beings, are especially well served by horrific monsters. Thus, there is a special functional relationship between the beings that mark off the horror genre and the pleasure and interest that many horror fictions sustain. That interest and that pleasure derive from the disclosure of unknown and impossible beings, just the sorts of things that seem to call for proof, discovery, and confirmation. Therefore, the disgust that such beings evince might be seen as part of the price to be paid for the pleasure of their disclosure. That is, the narrative expectation that the horror genre puts in place is that the being whose existence is in question be something that defies standing cultural categories; thus, disgust, so to say, is itself more or less mandated by the kind of curiosity that the horror narrative puts in place. The horror narrative could not deliver a successful, affirmative answer to its presiding question unless the disclosure of the monster indeed elicited disgust, or was of the sort that was a highly probable object of disgust.

That is, there is a strong relation of consilience between the objects of art-horror, on the one hand, and the revelatory plotting on the other. The kinds of plots and the subjects of horrific revelation are not merely compatible, but fit together or agree in a way that is highly appropriate. That the audience is naturally inquisitive about that which is unknown meshes with plotting that is concerned to render the unknown known by processes of discovery, explanation, proof, hypothesis, confirmation, and so on.

Of course, what it means to say that the horrific being is “unknown” here is that it is not accommodated by standing conceptual schemes. Moreover, if Mary Douglas’s account of impurity is correct, things that violate our conceptual scheme, by (for example) being interstitial, are things that we are prone to find disturbing. Thus, that horrific beings are predictably objects of loathing and revulsion is a function of the ways they violate our classificatory scheme.

If what is of primary importance about horrific creatures is that their very impossibility vis-à-vis our conceptual categories is what makes them function so compellingly in dramas of discovery and confirmation, then their disclosure, insofar as they are categorical violations, will be attached to some sense of disturbance, distress, and disgust. Consequently, the role

of the horrific creature in such narratives—where their disclosure captures our interest and delivers pleasure—will simultaneously mandate some probable revulsion. That is, in order to reward our interest by the disclosure of the putatively impossible beings of the plot, said beings ought to be disturbing, distressing, and repulsive in the way that theorists like Douglas predict phenomena that ill fit cultural classifications will be.

So, as a first approximation of resolving the paradox of horror, we may conjecture that we are attracted to the majority of horror fictions because of the way that the plots of discovery and the dramas of proof pique our curiosity, and abet our interest, ideally satisfying them in a way that is pleasurable.³ But if narrative curiosity about impossible beings is to be satisfied through disclosure, that process must require some element of probable disgust since such impossible beings are, *ex hypothesi*, disturbing, distressful, and repulsive.

One way of making the point is to say that the monsters in such tales of disclosure have to be disturbing, distressful, and repulsive, if the process of their discovery is to be rewarding in a pleasurable way. Another way to get at this is to say that the primary pleasure that narratives of disclosure afford—i.e., the interest we take in them, and the source of their attraction—resides in the processes of discovery, the play of proof, and the dramas of ratiocination that comprise them. It is not that we crave disgust, but that disgust is a predictable concomitant of disclosing the unknown, whose disclosure is a desire the narrative instills in the audience and then goes on to gladden. Nor will that desire be satisfied unless the monster defies our conception of nature which demands that it probably engender some measure of repulsion.

In this interpretation of horror narratives, the majority of which would appear to exploit the cognitive attractions of the drama of disclosure, experiencing the emotion of art-horror is not our absolutely primary aim in consuming horror fictions, even though it is a determining feature for identifying membership in the genre. Rather, art-horror is the price we are willing to pay for the revelation of that which is impossible and unknown, of that which violates our conceptual schema. The impossible being does disgust; but that disgust is part of an overall narrative address which is not only pleasurable, but whose potential pleasure depends on the confirmation of the existence of the monster as a being that violates, defies, or problematizes standing cultural classifications. Thus, we are attracted to, and many of us seek out, horror fictions of this sort despite the fact that they provoke disgust, because that disgust is required for the pleasure involved in engaging our curiosity in the unknown and drawing it into the processes of revelation, ratiocination, etc.

One objection to this line of conjecture is to point out that many of the kinds of plot structures found in horror fiction can be found in other genres. The play of discovery and confirmation, supported by ratiocination, can be found in detective thrillers. And the plots of the disaster movies of the first half of the seventies often also look like horror plots; but instead of ghouls and vampires calling for discovery and confirmation, potential earthquakes, avalanches, floods, and simmering electrical systems are the culprits.

Of course, with detective stories and disaster films, the evil that is disclosed is not impossible nor, in principle, unknown. This not only means that these narratives do not characteristically cause disgust, but that there is a qualitative difference in the kind of curiosity they invite and reward. My point here is not that one kind of curiosity is higher or lower than another kind; but only that there can be different kinds of curiosity engaged by plot structures that at a certain level of abstract description look formally equivalent, in terms of their major movements. However, it is one thing to be curious about the unknown but natural, and

another thing to be curious about the impossible. And it is the latter form of curiosity in which horror fictions typically traffic.

Two other, I think, deeper objections to the preceding hypotheses about the paradox of horror are:

1) So far the conjecture only deals with horror narratives, indeed, only with horror narratives of a certain sort—namely those involving such elements as discovery, confirmation, disclosure, revelation, explanation, hypothesis, ratiocination, etc. *But* there are instances of the horror genre, e.g., paintings, that need not involve narrative; *and* there are, according to my review of characteristic horror plots, horror narratives that don't involve these elements. There may be, for example, pure onset or pure confrontation plots. Moreover, earlier hypotheses about the paradox of horror were rejected because they were not sufficiently comprehensive. But since there are instances of horror that are not narrative and since there may be horror narratives that do not deploy the elements of disclosure so far identified as the central source of attraction to horror, this conjecture must be rejected as failing its own standards of generality.

2) This conjecture seems to make the experience of being horrified too remote from the experience of the genre. The revulsion we feel at the horrific being is too detached from the source of attraction we find in the genre. This is peculiar, since it is the emotion of art-horror that differentiates the genre. Indeed, it is very often the expectation that a given fiction is defined by this emotion that leads us to select it over candidates from other genres. So one seems justified in supposing that what makes the genre special must have some intimate connection with what draws audiences to seek it out especially. But the account, thus far, falters in this respect.

The first criticism is absolutely on target about the limitations of my hypothesis *in its present state*. My view is not yet sufficiently comprehensive. The horror genre includes examples, like photographs and paintings, that do not involve sustained narration, especially sustained narration of the particular sort I have emphasized; and, there are horror narratives of the pure onset or pure confrontation variety that do not offer audiences the refined and sometimes intricately articulated strategems of disclosure referred to above. However, I do not regard these observations as decisive counterexamples to my approach, but rather as an opportunity to deepen and expand it, indeed in ways that will also enable me to handle the second of the objections in the course of adjusting my position in order to accommodate the first objection.

I do think that the best account that can be given of the paradox of horror for the *majority* of works of horrific art will be very much like the one that I have already offered. However, it is true that it fails to cover non-narrative horror and horror fictions little concerned with the drama of disclosure. To deal with these cases more needs to be said; but the more-that-needs-to-be-said fits with what has already been said in a way that enriches while also extending the theory developed so far.

Central to my approach has been the idea that the objects of horror are fundamentally linked with cognitive interests, most notably with curiosity. The plotting gambits of disclosure/discovery narratives play with, expand, sustain, and develop this initial cognitive appetite in many directions. And as well, this is the way in which horror fictions usually go.

But it would be a mistake to think that this curiosity is *solely* a function of plotting, even if the plotting of certain types of fictions—namely those concerned with disclosure—brings it to its highest pitch. For the objects of art-horror in and of themselves engender curiosity as well. This is why they can support the kind of disclosure plots referred to above. Consequently,

even if it is true that horrific curiosity is best expiated upon within disclosure plots, and that, in its most frequent and compelling cases, it does mobilize such plots, it is also true that it can be abetted and rewarded without the narrative contextualization of disclosure/discovery plotting. Thus, it can be the case that while horror is most often, and perhaps most powerfully and most primarily, developed within narrative contexts of disclosure, it may also obtain in non-narrative and non-disclosure contexts for the same reason, viz., the power of the objects of art-horror to command curiosity.

Recall again that the objects of art-horror are, by definition, impure. This is to be understood in terms of their being anomalous. Obviously, the anomalous nature of these beings is what makes them disturbing, distressing, and disgusting. They are violations of our ways of classifying things and such frustrations of a world-picture are bound to be disturbing.

However, anomalies are also interesting. The very fact that they are anomalies fascinates us. Their deviation from the paradigms of our classificatory scheme captures our attention immediately. It holds us spellbound. It commands and retains our attention. It is an attracting force; it attracts curiosity, i.e., it makes us curious; it invites inquisitiveness about its surprising properties. One wants to gaze upon the unusual, even when it is simultaneously repelling.

Monsters, the anomalous beings who star in this book, are repelling because they violate standing categories. But for the self-same reason, they are also compelling of our attention. They are attractive, in the sense that they elicit interest, and they are the cause of, for many, irresistible attention, again, just because they violate standing categories. They are curiosities. They can rivet attention and thrill for the self-same reason that they disturb, distress, and disgust.

If these confessedly pedestrian remarks are convincing, three interesting conclusions are suggested. First, the attraction of non-narrative- and non-disclosure-type narration in horror is explicable, as is disclosure-type narrative, fundamentally by virtue of curiosity, a feature of horrific beings that follows from their anomalous status as violations of standing cultural schemes. Second, horrific creatures are able to contribute so well to sustaining interest in disclosure plots to an important degree just because in being anomalous, they can be irresistibly interesting. And lastly, with special reference to the paradox of horror, monsters, the objects of art-horror, are themselves sources of ambivalent responses, for as violations of standing cultural categories, they are disturbing and disgusting, but, at the same time, they are also objects of fascination—again, just because they transgress standing categories of thought. That is, the ambivalence that bespeaks the paradox of horror is already to be found in the very objects of art-horror which are disgusting and fascinating, repelling and attractive due to their anomalous nature.⁴

I have identified impurity as an essential feature of art-horror; specifically, the objects of art-horror are, in part, impure beings, monsters recognized as outside the natural order of things as set down by our conceptual schema. This claim may be tested by noting the truly impressive frequency with which the apparition of such monsters in horror fictions correlates explicitly in such texts with mention of revulsion, disgust, repulsion, nausea, abhorrence, and so on. The source of this attitude, moreover, seems traceable to the fact that they, as David Pole puts it, "might in a way be called messy; they defy or mess up existing categories. . . . [W]hat initially disturbs us is most often merely a jumbling [or obfuscation] of kinds."⁵ But at the same time that the breakdown of our conceptual categories disturbs, it also fixes our attention. It stimulates our cognitive appetite with the prospect of something previously inconceivable.

The fascination of the horrific being comes in tandem with disturbance. And, in fact, I would submit that for those who are attracted to the genre, the fascination at least compensates for the disturbance. This may be explained to a certain extent by reference to the thought theory of fictional emotion discussed earlier in this book. According to that view, the audience knows that the object of art-horror does not exist before them. The audience is only reacting to the thought that such and such an impure being might exist. This mutes, without eliminating, the disturbing aspect of the object of art-horror and allows more opportunity for fascination with the monster to take hold.⁶

One supposes that fascination would be too great a luxury to endure, if one, against all odds, were to encounter a horrific monster in “real life.” We, like the characters in horror fictions, would feel distressingly helpless; for such creatures, insofar as they defy our conceptual scheme, would leave us at a loss to think of how to deal with them—they would baffle our practical response, paralyzing us in terror (as they generally do to characters in horror fictions for the same reason). However, with art-horror, it is only the thought of the creature that is at issue; we know that it does not exist; we are not taxed literally by practical questions about what is to be done. So the fearsome and loathsome aspects of the monsters do not impinge upon us with the same practical urgency, allowing a space for fascination to take root. So, as a second approximation for resolving the paradox of horror, we can explain how it is that what would, by hypothesis, ordinarily distress, disturb, and disgust us, can also be the source of pleasure, interest, and attraction. With reference to art-horror the answer is that the monster—as a categorical violation—fascinates for the self-same reason it disgusts and, since we know the monster is but a fictional confection, our curiosity is affordable.

This position enables us to give an answer to the justified objection to our first response to the paradox of horror, which response was so wedded to disclosure-type narratives, to wit: non-narrative examples of art-horror, such as those found in the fine arts and narrative horror fictions that do not deploy disclosure devices, attract their audiences insofar as the objects of art-horror promote fascination at the same time they distress; indeed, both responses emanate from the same aspects of the horrific beings. The two responses are, as a matter of (contingent) fact, inseparable in horror. Moreover, this fascination can be savored, because the distress in question is not behaviorally pressing; it is a response to the thought of a monster, not to the actual presence of a disgusting or fearsome thing.

If it is true that fascination is the key to our attention to the art-horror in general, then it is also the case that the curiosity and fascination that is basic to the genre also receive especial amplification in what I have referred to as narratives of disclosure and discovery. There curiosity, fascination, and our cognitive inquisitiveness are engaged, addressed, and sustained in a highly articulated way through what I have called the drama of proof and such processes of continuous revelation as ratiocination, discovery, hypothesis formation, confirmation, and so on.

At this point, then, I am in a position to summarize my approach to the paradox of horror. It is a twofold theory, whose elements I refer to respectively as the universal theory and the general theory. The universal theory of our attraction to art-horror—which covers non-narrative horror, non-disclosure horror narratives, *and* disclosure narratives—is that what leads people to seek out horror is fascination as characterized in the analyses above. This is the basic, generic calling card of the form.

At the same time, I should also like to advance what I call a general—rather than a universal—theory of the appeal of art-horror. The most commonly recurring—that is to say the most

generally found—exercises in the horror genre appear to be horror narratives of the disclosure sort. The attraction of these instances, like all other examples of the genre, are to be explained in terms of curiosity and fascination. However, with these cases, the initial curiosity and fascination found in the genre are developed to an especially high degree through devices that enhance and sustain curiosity. If the genre begins, so to speak, in curiosity, it is enhanced by the consilient structures of disclosure plotting. In such cases, then, what attracts us to this sort of horror—which seems to me the most pervasive⁷—is the whole structure and staging of curiosity in the narrative, in virtue of the experience of the extended play of fascination it affords. That is, as Hume noted of tragedy, the source of our aesthetic pleasure in such examples of horror is primarily the whole structure of the narrative in which, of course, the apparition of the horrific being is an essential, and, as the universal theory shows, a facilitating part.

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One advantage of this theoretical approach over some of the rival theories, like psychoanalysis, is that it can accommodate our interest in horrific beings whose imagery does not seem straightforwardly, or even circuitously, rooted in such things as repression. That is, the religious awe explanation and psychoanalytic explanations of horror confront counterexamples in those cases of horror where the monsters seem to be produced by what might be thought of as virtually formal processes of “categorical-jamming.” Wells’s cephalopods engender neither cosmic awe nor are they worked up pointedly enough in the text to be linked with some identifiably repressed material. Thus, these attempted explanations are not sufficiently comprehensive, because they cannot assimilate that which we can call formalistically (or formulaically) constructed horrific beings.

My approach, on the other hand, has no such problems with horrific beings generated solely by classificatory obfuscation, since I trace their fascination (as well as their distressfulness) to their category-jamming. Thus, the comprehensiveness of my theory in the face of such counterexamples counts as a strong consideration in favor of my theory.

At this point, it may be helpful to remind the reader that I have been concerned to find a comprehensive account of the appeal of horror—that is, an account of horror that pertains to its attraction across periods of time, across subgenres and across particular works of horror, whether they be masterpieces or not. In this respect, I am, in part, regarding horror as what Fredric Jameson has called a mode. He writes:

when we speak of a mode, what can we mean but that this particular type of literary discourse is not bound to the conventions of a given age, nor indissolubly linked to a given type of verbal artifact, but rather persists as a temptation and a mode of expression across a whole range of historical periods, seeming to offer itself, if only intermittently, as a formal possibility which can be revived and renewed?⁸

To ask what is compelling about horror as a mode is to ask for the most basic, recurring “temptations” afforded by the genre for what one supposes to be the average audience. My answer is the detailed account of fascination and curiosity found above. This answer seems more comprehensive than psychoanalytic and religious explanations of horror as a mode—more encompassing of the widest number of recurring cases.⁹

However, having said this, I do not necessarily preclude that psychoanalytic and religious explanations may not offer supplemental insight into why particular works of horror, particular

periodic cycles, or why specified subgenres may exert their own special attractions over and above the generic attraction of the mode. Whether and to what extent such explanations are convincing depends on the critical and interpretive analysis of individual subgenres, cycles, and works. I have no theoretical reason to announce ahead of time that such critical work may not inform us about the levers of attraction that certain cycles, subgenres, and individual works deploy over and above the generic attractions of the mode. The persuasiveness of such critical work will have to be judged on a case-by-case basis. I have only been concerned to advance a view of the generic power of the horror mode and I will not here and now express any principled reservation to the possibility of the application of religious criticism, myth criticism, psychoanalytic criticism, cosmic-awe criticism, etc. to isolated cycles, subgenres and works in the horror mode.

It is my impression that the curiosity/fascination resolution that I have offered to the paradox of horror—despite its reliance on somewhat technical notions like categorical violations, and co-existentialism—is pretty obvious. It is certainly not as jazzy as many reductivist psychoanalytic theories. In fact, it may strike many as not being theoretical at all, but as nothing but a long-winded exercise in common sense.

I do think that the approach—especially in the way it works out the interplay of the forces of attraction and repulsion—is elucidating; though I can see why when stated in abbreviated form—horror attracts because anomalies command attention and elicit curiosity—it may sound platitudinous. Three remarks seem appropriate here: first, the very comprehensiveness of the explanation of the phenomena that we are seeking might tend to make the solution appear truistic and trivially broad, even if it is not; second, that the theory seems commonsensical need not count against it—there is no reason to think that common sense cannot contribute insight; and last, as perhaps a corollary to the latter observation, that competing explanations resort to arcane sources is not of necessity a virtue in their favor.

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Notes

- 1 The special fermata over the discovery/disclosure of the monster in horror narratives is also in evidence in some of the most standardly employed expositional strategies in movies. For example, with respect to point-of-view editing in horror films, J. P. Telotte writes: “one of the most frequent and compelling images in the horror film repertoire is that of the wide, staring eyes of some victim, expressing stark terror or disbelief and attesting to an ultimate threat to the human proposition. To maximize the effect of this image, though, the movie most often reverses what is a standard film technique and, in fact, the natural sequence of events. Normally an action is presented and then commented upon with reaction shots; the cause is shown and then its effect. The horror film, however, tends to reverse the process, offering the reaction shot first and thus fostering a chilling suspense by holding the terrors in abeyance for a moment; furthermore, such an arrangement upsets our ordinary cause–effect orientation. What is eventually betrayed is the onset of some unbelievable terror, something which stubbornly refuses to be accounted for by our normal perceptual patterns.” Though I do not agree with the analysis—in terms of identification—that Telotte appends to this description, the

description itself is an apt one of a recurring cinematic strategy in horror films, and it suggests the way in which this editing figure reflects, in the form of a “mini-narrative,” the larger rhythms of discovery and disclosure in horror plotting. See J. P. Telotte, “Faith and Idolatry in the Horror Film,” in *Planks of Reason*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, 1984), pp. 25–26.

- 2 In claiming that the pleasures derived from horror are cognitive in the broad sense—of engaging curiosity—I am attempting to explain why the genre often engages us. I am not attempting to justify the genre as worthy of our attention because its appeal is cognitive. Nor by saying that it is cognitive, in the special sense of engaging curiosity, am I even implicitly signaling that I think it superior to some other genres whose appeal might be said to be exclusively emotive.
- 3 “Ideally” here is meant to take note of the fact that not all such horror fictions are successful.
- 4 This is not said to retract my earlier claim that with disclosure-type narration our fascination fastens primarily on the way in which our curiosity is orchestrated. However, in order to be orchestrated and so have that orchestration rewarded, the monster will ideally be capable of some independent source of fascination. And that source of fascination, I conjecture, is its anomalous nature.
- 5 David Pole, *Aesthetics, Form and Emotion* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1983), pp. 228–29.

In composing the last stages of this book I was pleasantly surprised to learn that the late David Pole had reached a number of the same conclusions about disgust and horror that I advanced in the opening part of this book in his essay “Disgust and Other Forms of Aversion” (in *Aesthetics, Form and Emotion*). Much of this correspondence in approach is explicable by the fact that both Pole and I rely very heavily on the researches of Mary Douglas. Pole explicitly cites Mary Douglas’s book *Implicit Meanings*, a text that I also independently consulted in the construction of my theory. (See Mary Douglas, *Implicit Meanings* [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975].)

There are, however, some differences between Pole’s view and my own. He considers horror in the actual contexts as well as aesthetic ones, whereas my focus is narrowly on art-horror. Also, whereas I am only concerned with the way in which entities, specifically beings, are horrifying, Pole is interested in horrifying events as well as entities. Nevertheless, both of us take disgust to be a central element in horror, and both see the disgust and fascination of horrific things to be grounded in their categorically anomalous nature.

But there is one point of strong disagreement between Pole and myself. Pole thinks that every instance of horror involves self-identification of the audience with the object of horror. When the horrific is manifested we incorporate it through some process of identification such that it becomes part of us (p. 225). The gesture of being horrified, then, is seen as an extrusion or expulsion of that which is disgusting, which has been incorporated. The model of being horrified here is that of vomiting.

I find this hypothesis dubious. In previous sections I have argued against the notion of identification. Also, I have maintained that if identification amounts to admiring or being seduced by horrific creatures like Dracula, then, even in this loose sense, identification is not definitory of all our encounters with horrific beings. That is, identification in this psychologically inoffensive sense is not a comprehensive feature of art-horror.

Undoubtedly, an advocate of Pole's position would respond to this objection by noting that Pole includes under the rubric of *self-identification* being interested in or fascinated by the object of horror. But to view identification (even "self-identification"), interest, and fascination in the same light distorts all of the concepts in this cluster beyond recognition. I do not have to identify with everything that interests me; nor need I be fascinated by everything with which I identify (for I might not be fascinated by myself). In any case, the extension of the concept of identification to subsume interest is clearly strained. Therefore, I question the viability of the identification/fascination/interest characterization of horror, which, of course, also challenges the extrusion/vomiting model of the horrific response as an adequate, general theory.

Moreover, Pole appears to me to want us to think of disgust exclusively as a process in which we imaginatively swallow the object of our loathing and then spit it out. But with regard to horror, it is hard to imagine swallowing something as big as Mothra or even something the size of the Creature from the Black Lagoon. And in any case, not all disgust, it seems to me, is connected with oral incorporation, e.g., the aversion to funestation (something that comes into play with many monsters, such as zombies).

- 6 In her article, "A Strange Kind of Sadness," Marcia Eaton postulates that in order to appreciate distressing fictional events we must somehow be in control. As Gary Iseminger points out—in his "How Strange A Sadness?"—the idea of control here is a bit ambiguous. However, if the control that Eaton has in mind is self-control (rather than control over the events in the story), then adoption of the thought theory of fictional response with respect to horror could explain how we have this control, by virtue of the fact that we are knowingly only responding to the thought that some impure creature is devouring human flesh. Indeed, perhaps the very notion that I am merely *entertaining* this thought implies the requisite self-control. See Marcia Eaton, "A Strange Kind of Sadness," in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 41, no. 1 (Fall 1982); and Gary Iseminger, "How Strange A Sadness?" in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 42, no. 1 (Fall 1983).

In his "Enjoying Negative Emotions in Fictions," John Moreall also cites the importance of control in enjoying fictions. He seems to suggest that such control enables us to vicariously feel the pleasure of the characters when they are angry or sad (p. 102). But I am not convinced that it is correct to say of the victims in horror fictions that they can feel pleasure in the state they are in. Perhaps some examples of anger and sadness have pleasurable dimensions. But surely not all the emotional states of fictional characters have such a dimension—surely, for example, horror does not. See John Moreall, "Enjoying Negative Emotions in Fiction," in *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 9, no. 1 (April 1985).

- 7 If I am statistically wrong about the pervasiveness of disclosure narration in the genre, then I would probably want to rename the second part of my view *the special theory* of the appeal of horror. For I think the account of the appeal of disclosure narration offered above is right for that "special" group of horror narratives even if that group does not represent the most common formation in the genre. Needless to say, however, at present, I still am of the opinion that the drama of disclosure—in the ways discussed earlier in the book—is the most commonly practiced form in the genre.
- 8 Fredric Jameson, "Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre," *New Literary History*, 7, 1 (Autumn 1975), pp. 133–63.
- 9 Some readers may be surprised that I have not reviewed the possibility of some sort of catharsis explanation—after the fashion often attributed to Aristotle's analysis of

tragedy—of the pleasures of horror. Such an approach sees the aesthetic pleasure of distressful representations to be a matter of having our negative emotions relieved. Stated one way, this kind of theory is quite absurd. The pleasure in a given genre is located in getting rid of certain negative feelings that we have. But we only have these feelings because a given instance of the genre has engendered the relevant displeasure in us in the first place. And this hardly makes the interest we have in the works in the genre plausible. For it would make no sense for me to put my hand in a vise simply for the pleasure of having my pain relieved when the vise is loosened.

Of course, a catharsis theorist might avoid this attempted refutation by analogy by claiming that the negative emotions relieved are not those engendered by the fiction itself but rather are negative emotions that have built up over the course of everyday life. The cathartic effect, then, would be the evacuation of these pent-up emotions. But if this is the way that catharsis is thought of, then it will clearly have no application to art-horror. For horror of the sort found in horror fictions has no correlate in ordinary life and, therefore, cannot be pent-up in the course of everyday events. This is entailed by the fact that we don't encounter monsters in everyday life; so we are not accumulating the requisite sort of negative emotion to be relieved upon attending to horror fictions. This indicates that catharsis cannot possibly be the correct model for art-horror; whether it is relevant to the discussion of other negative, aesthetic emotions is an issue beyond the scope of this book.