Horror and Art-Dread

Dark Horrors

Some recent movies herald a change in horror films during the past decade or so: *The Sixth Sense* [M. Night Shyamalan, 1999], *Blair Witch Project* [Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez, 1999], *The Others* [Alejandro Amenabar, 2001], and *Signs* [Shyamalan, 2002]. In these films the horror is subtle and lingering, a matter of mood more than monsters. Such horror differs from other waves of the genre—the psycho killers of the 1960s, the slashers of the 1970s, and self-conscious 1990s parodies like *Scream*. Recent films of uneasy suspense return us to the understated horror of classics Val Lewton produced, *Cat People* [1942], *Isle of the Dead* [1945], *The Body Snatcher* [1945], and *I Walked with a Zombie* [1943]. Instead of witnessing deeds of a central monster, we experience a vague sense of impending doom and disaster. Instead of ever more developed gore and special effects, we see only fog and shadows.

What is the appeal of this sort of horror, and how is it different from, or related to, that of stories with a clear monster or gross special effects? Various accounts of horror’s appeal have been offered. Explanations from cognitive psychology posit that to watch a horror film is “ego strengthening” [Torben Grodal], or that people with specific tastes enjoy the predictable genre effects of being scared [Ed Tan]. Some empirical research suggests that an interest in horror fits with personality traits like thrill seeking, boredom susceptibility, and risk-taking. An interest in horror has also been associated with pursuit of sexual and voyeuristic thrills.

Noël Carroll’s explanation in *The Philosophy of Horror* goes deeper. He cites many examples in constructing an account of the goals of the genre, in an approach modeled on Aristotle’s treatment of tragedy in the *Poetics*. Horror aims at producing a distinct aesthetic emotion, “art-horror,” combining fear and revulsion with pleasurable cognitive interests in explanation and understanding. Art-horror arises through plot patterns that lead the audience along in understanding the monsters that are basic to the genre. Monsters are entities “whose existence

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A significant trend in contemporary horror is the film of art-dread, where the horror is subtle and lingering, a matter of mood more than monsters. Examples include The Sixth Sense.

is denied by contemporary science. To evoke horror, monsters must be threatening, repulsive, and disgusting, typically through being impure or categorically mixed. Audiences withstand repulsive monsters in order to experience the pleasure of the genre, "art-horror."

My account in The Naked and the Undead: Evil and the Appeal of Horror disagrees with Carroll's by arguing that audiences have a more direct interest in the horrific itself. I locate the appeal of the horrific in the genre's unique presentations of evil and human struggles with it. Evil is fascinating, in both life and literature, and in the horror genre it appears in many guises. People enjoy the way good horror stories depict human encounters with evil—whether to understand and defeat it, or to succumb to its power and temptations.

Carroll sought a definition of horror applicable across media, including literature as well as film. I tried only to discuss interesting cases of horror, without claiming that all horror deals with evil, let alone that all horror does so profoundly. Even more than Carroll, I feel I am following the example of the Poetics. Aristotle does not just explain tragedy's appeal in terms of a certain aesthetic emotion (in his case, *katharsis*), but he requires that this flow from a moral narrative, one depicting actions of good or bad people.
Once again, I would say that horror movies of mood and atmosphere are interesting for how they treat moral struggles with evil. Such movies may be fun like good ghost stories, but can also offer visions of profound evil—of an evil god or an unjust cosmos. Carroll recognizes that certain types of horror stories do not fit his model since they have no clear monsters (his cites stories like Stevenson’s “The Body Snatcher”). He thinks they focus not on monstrous entities but on “mysterious, unnerving, preternatural events.” Although Carroll proposes that the relevant emotion these eerie-event stories arouse be called “art-dread,” a correlate to his notion of “art-horror.” He thinks “art-dread probably deserves a theory of its own.”

My essay will describe art-dread, but without accepting Carroll’s clear-cut distinction between horror about events versus entities. To begin, I will say more about the emotion of dread and art-dread. Then I will discuss three of the best recent film examples—Sixth Sense, Blair Witch Project, and Signs. Along the way, I will say more about reasons for the appeal of art-dread.

Dread versus Horror and Anxiety

Dread is more rare in our lives than anxiety, fear, or horror, and harder to define. It involves a sense of danger, like fear, but is looser and less focused on a particular object, like anxiety. This also helps to differentiate dread from horror, which tends to be a response to a fairly specific object. Like horror, dread involves recoiling with terror, but it does not include the strong repulsion and disgust of horror.

Let me offer an example. Dread might characterize our worries about anthrax being transmitted through the mail. The danger of this deadly and little-recognized disease is as nebulous and floating as the unseen microscopic spores that could easily be sent into our homes. Anthrax itself, like ebola virus or bubonic plague, is horrifying—it would be repulsive to witness or have their symptoms. But here, as in the films I want to discuss, dread involves a threat that is not only unidentified and powerful but also unnerving because it is deeply abhorrent to reason. The sense of danger from something dangerous and hugely evil evokes a very “large” fear—a dread.

We can characterize dread as an ongoing fear of imminent threat from something deeply unnerving and evil, yet not well-defined or well-understood. Dread seems similar to anxiety, since both states involve elements of fear and suspense in response to a vague threat. Robert Solomon writes, in differentiating such emotions:

In any case, anxiety has an “obscure” object, but horror, by contrast, has a quite striking and specific object. So, too, with dread, another emotion whose object remains at a distance; thus Kierkegaard took this concept to refer to “the unknown” in an unusually profound way. Dread shares with fear a sense of imminent danger, though it shares with anxiety the obscurity of its object.
Solomon's allusion to Kierkegaard is instructive. Dread, unlike anxiety, involves an anticipated encounter with something "profound"—something particularly powerful, grave, and inexorable.16

Existentialists regarded dread as a kind of philosophical emotion, a fundamental response to aspects of our human condition. Dread about the anthrax threat involves shocked disbelief about the extent of human hatred and the capacity for evil. Dread in a movie may stem from a sense of threat posed by an evil agent, whether resurrected corpses, a witch, or visitors from outer space. In both movies and life, dread may also be existential, registering fear not of some malign agents but of precisely the reverse—that the world has no ruling agents and that we humans are alone in a world that fails to satisfy our expectations for purpose, meaning, and justice.

Carroll makes a related point when he says that art-dread includes a "sense of unease or awe, or momentary anxiety and terror of ideas, such as one entertains the idea of unavowed, inhuman and perhaps concealed and inexplicable forces rule the universe." This has religious overtones. And dread has often been described as the feeling humans have in response to the divine, for example, to Yahweh, the Old Testament Lord. Because dread involves contact with something vast and overwhelming, it can also include awe, admiration, or reverence. Film examples show this. In *Signs*, the farmer and the cop express uneasy awe when they recognize the inhuman perfection of the crop circles. Similarly, the youths' terror in *Blair Witch Project* includes awe at the malign deviousness of whatever is out there in the woods.

This complex of emotions in dread, a combination of unsettling fear with elements of profundity, is something early modern philosophers discussed under the heading of the *sublime*. Dread resembles our response to the sublime as described by Edmund Burke in his important treatise on the subject in 1757.17 Burke defined the sublime as a feeling of terror in response to an object or force with vast power, danger, scope, and/or obscurity. Many languages use terms for deep terror that can also denote fear, reverence, or wonder. It is often felt about natural phenomena like the ocean, extremely large or small things, or deep darkness.

Burke emphasized a kind of irrationality in our response to the sublime. He explains the sublime as a feeling with physiological sources in bodily pains (as opposed to beauty, which stems from certain pleasures).18 In the case of something sublime (as with an object or situation inspiring dread) we face something inexplicable and overwhelming, and terror, a kind of tension or pain, renders the mind "thunderstruck." The mind shuts down as the body feeds us shocking information; fear outruns our reason. Burke comments, "Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force."19 Dread is like Burke's sublime. It too involves irrationality or a-rationality. The object inspiring dread affects us without our being able to process it clearly and intelligently.20 It is frightening, vague, and profound.
Art-dread is an emotion of dread evoked by or in response to an artwork. For artworks to evoke and sustain an emotion of art-dread, they must depict an encounter with something terrible or unsettling that is also deep, obscure, and difficult to comprehend. There may be hints of a terrifying agent out there, but it need not be a repulsive monster. It can remain uncertain whether there is any agent involved in the threat at all. In *Blair Witch Project* some danger lurks in the woods whether it is due to pranksters, a murderous hermit, rural degenerates, or the titular witch. Other movies of dreadful horror suggest that a place or person is subject to destructive forces which may or may not intimate an evil agent is at work. In Hitchcock's *The Birds*, the birds are horrific agents, but the film creates dread by leaving open the question of what lies behind their strangely destructive behavior. Much the same is true of the bizarre meteorological events of *The Last Wave*, an apocalyptic film that opens with a hair-raising scene of hail falling from a clear blue sky.21

In movies dread is often a gut response to things that are deeply unnerving for no clear reason. In *Signs*, the Pennsylvania farm family sits in shock after their dog has gone berserk and attacked the little girl. The bundles of twigs hanging from trees in *Blair Witch Project* literally stop the characters in their tracks. This same response occurs when characters see the suddenly curtailless windows in *The Others* or the open kitchen cupboards in *Sixth Sense*. We know that something is wrong in these scenes, without knowing what or why. We can almost taste the dread among guests at Irena’s (Simone Simon’s) wedding dinner in *Cat People*, when a beautiful cat-like stranger (Elizabet Russell) approaches to say something in a foreign tongue. Even though her words are unintelligible, she conveys a deeply strange threat.

But dread is presumably painful and unpleasant, so how can it be enjoyable to experience art-dread? Why do people enjoy the convincing depiction of an anticipated encounter with great vague evil, or with deep cosmic amorality? Some theorists might point to a certain natural perversity among humans. While odd-sounding, this thesis has its defenders. In fact, Burke’s account of the sublime comes close to this. He thinks our inevitable interest in the misfortunes of others indicates a kind of delight that stems both from our natural, God-given sympathy and from our relief when pain escapes us and falls on our fellows instead.22

I want to suggest instead that movies and other fictions that inspire art-dread are enjoyable because, by offering imaginative and plausible encounters with evil and cosmic amorality, they help us ponder and respond emotionally to natural and deep worries about the nature of the world. Stories about how humans experience and address evil and suffering are common and are among our most profound artworks, from *Gilgamesh* and *The Iliad* to *King Lear* and *Beloved*. Such stories often include moments of horror and dread. One can imagine the Old
Testament story of Job as the premise for a powerful movie of dreadful horror: an upright man living a good life suffers horrendous problems and loses everything and everyone he loves in a rapid series of enemy attacks and bizarre meteorological strikes. His own body becomes covered with boils, his flesh clotted with worms. Job acquires an acute sense of human powerlessness and insignificance in the control of a scary being who boasts of his own powers but will not explain himself.

Without treading onto theologically shaky ground, I want to say that some examples of art-dread in horror films raise similar questions about cosmic justice, evil, and suffering. They express a desire to grapple with large questions about our place in the cosmos. Is this life all? Can the dead communicate with those who mourn their loss? Can they speak out about the injustice of their death? Is the world ruled by a benevolent deity, at the mercy of an evil demon, or is it just an affair of chance, the play of physical forces indifferent to our petty human dreams?

Carroll anticipates my point by noting that often tales of art-dread have a “conclusion that correlate[s] with some sense of cosmic justice,” perhaps with an “O. Henry style twist.” This seems a good account of what is going on in movies like Blair Witch Project, Sixth Sense, and Signs. The boy in Sixth Sense who “sees dead people” has an inexplicable power to see and hear dead people who want to express anger about their untimely fates. The unsettling “twist” at the conclusion makes us too experience something beyond normal perception—we too have “seen dead people,” as it were. Blair Witch Project, with its heroine’s tearful apologies near the end, suggests that the youths must die because they have violated certain cosmic limits. And Signs spotlights a Job-like man beaten down by his suffering who has concluded we are alone with no benevolent deity to offer meaning and comfort. Signs resolves its deep dread with an ending that shows that suffering has some purpose—a move one might see as an uplifting triumph or (alas) as a Hollywood necessity.

The Nature and Dynamics of Art-Dread

To fill out my account of art-dread, two broad issues must be addressed. The first concerns the nature of this emotion; the second, its sources.

Is art-dread a real emotion? The veracity of our emotional responses to fictions has been much debated in recent literature of aesthetics. Some philosophers argue we cannot feel a real emotion in response to something we know is a fiction, while others say we do, but it involves a kind of illusion. Still others categorize the emotion as “just-pretend” or simulated, deploying our ample capacities for imagination. Such debates reflect disagreement about the very nature of emotions, a topic also disputed among philosophers, psychologists, and neuroscientists. There are advocates of reductive and physiologically based accounts, of
evolutionary accounts, and of accounts that emphasize more cognitive elements and the role of higher-order reasoning.\textsuperscript{26}

I cannot pretend to resolve such debates here. But it is my view that emotions do involve a cognitive dimension, and that responses to artwork may include actual emotions. Real emotions often arise in ordinary life in response to thoughts about possibilities, or to memories, and not just in response to actually occurring events. I can feel fear at the thought of a terrorist attack on my airplane, sadness at remembering my grandmother's death, and delight at the thought of winning the lottery, though these are not present now, and two are just remote possibilities. My view about the nature of aesthetic emotions is most like Carroll's. He argues that art-horror is similar to real horror in important ways. Art-horror is horror evoked by the thought of certain types of objects in a fiction. It involves real feelings of fear and disgust and can even include physiological responses in the viewer. The key difference is that the relevant thought that inspires this emotion concerns a possible horrifying monster, not a real one. This means that our response will not extend to actions in the ways it would in confronting a real monster (we do not run away from Godzilla on the screen).

I think that much the same is also true of art-dread. Dread in response to a horror film is an emotional response to a thought of the possibility of something very profoundly threatening. Dread is itself a more abstract or intellectual emotion than horror or fear because its object is something vague that requires conceptualization. Even when dread involves a sort of gut-level fear, like my fear of anthrax on an envelope, it also requires an imaginative exercise of conceptualization, seeing that the world is not as it should be or as we wish it were. Dread about anthrax, for instance, involves the imaginative thought of unseen spores distributed into mailboxes, through post offices onto mail trucks, then coming into our mail slots and floaing up to "get us." Dread about a witch in the dark woods, about corpses returning to life, or about the meaninglessness of our actions, requires in each case some exercise of abstract thought and imagination. It is reasonable to think that literature and art may conjure up dread by assisting or prompting our imaginative encounters with such threats.

Better films of dreadful horror, then, can provoke art-dread in their audiences by making thoughts of vague yet evil threats take a form that seems plausible. Carroll too suggests that tales of art dread create a "sense of unease or awe, or momentary anxiety and foreboding [as] one entertains the idea that unavowed, inhuman and perhaps concealed and inexplicable forces rule the universe."\textsuperscript{27} Of course, a movie's power to evoke dread may vary from person to person and time to time. For a filmgoer who cannot entertain the plausibility (for whatever reason) of the threat in question, a movie will probably not evoke art-dread. Similarly in real life, it is likely that some people felt more dread about anthrax in the mail than others.

I now turn to consider my second question about art-dread, concerning its causal sources. Carroll thinks art-horror is evoked mainly through plot and
narrative. Is this true also of art-dread? Given Carroll’s idea that art-dread is more event-based than entity-based, this would seem likely. (Events require a plot, right?) However, Carroll’s distinction does not withstand close scrutiny. Monstrous entities will not be effectively horrific or threatening unless they do things, a point acknowledged by the strong emphasis on plot, the narrative of events, in Carroll’s own book. Furthermore, I think that art-horror involves a central fascination with the horrific itself. This is fostered by cinematic devices other than plot that make monsters vivid in their scary repulsiveness.

Much the same will be true of art-dread. To be effective, a film of art-dread must make plausible the thought of imminent danger from something that is vague but profoundly evil or unsettling. This requires a combination of effective narrative with other cinematic features. The evil or amorality in question must be made real enough to seem threatening, yet not too concrete.

Plot will narrate how characters encounter and react to the evil or amoral threat. Films like Cat People, Blair Witch Project, Sixth Sense, and Signs have strong plots, in which many things happen: people go places, discover things, ask questions, suffer problems, survive or die, and so on. But other cinematic features play a part in making the thought of something dreadful out there seem real and gripping, yet also unspecified and vague. In movies, imagery, lighting, editing, sound, music, acting, and the like must work together to sustain the sense of fear and uncertain suspense so crucial to dread.

For example, the unsettling fact that the boy can see dead people in Sixth Sense emerges slowly in the plot as Dr. Crowe wins Cole’s trust and learns his secret. But it is also conveyed onscreen by showing how the boy confronts a chill in the air, shown by sudden clouds of breath, his shivering, or close-ups of the moving dial of a thermostat. Similarly, the recurring image of the giant dead tree outside the house in The Others reinforces its atmosphere of intense unease and decay. A famously scary scene in Cat People creates fear of the evil panther chasing Irena’s rival Alice Moore (Jane Randolph), who is swimming alone at night in a pool. We hear coughing noises offscreen and see mysterious shadows glide amid reflections on the wall. Ominous sounds from an unseen source can be very chilling, like the weird screeches in Blair Witch Project or the knocking noises and rustling corn stalks in Signs. Signs features many creepy and dread-inspiring moments, as when the dogs’ hackles rise or the two brothers glimpse a tall shadow leaping off their roof in the dark.

In many of the movies I am considering, acting is also crucial in conveying the dread the characters feel. The pinched, pale face of Nicole Kidman throughout The Others shows that this woman knows something is very wrong in her house and her children. Or, in the Lewton film Isle of the Dead, the lurking, mysterious threat is intensified by Boris Karloff’s performance as General Phedra. His staring eyes and rigid demeanor spook the others in the small group trapped on the Greek island. Much of the film is shot at night and focuses on the still branches of trees and shrubs, stony pathways that lead past the crypt, shadowy
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interiors, crypts, and the like. Karloff’s craggy and shadowy face echoes the island’s stark scenery.

What causes dread may change for different audiences and time periods. Although universally admired for its eerie atmosphere, some of Cat People’s scary scenes are not as powerful now as when the film first appeared. Stephen King has written that even though this is “almost certainly the best horror film of the forties,” he cannot respond to an important scene where Alice is chased at night by Irena as the panther, because he is distracted by the scene’s no-longer-convincing soundstage version of Central Park.29 On the other hand, he finds the movie’s other famous scary sequence, in which Alice is trapped at night in the swimming pool, still convincingly spooky.

I now turn to examine three examples of movies that evoke art-dread in depicting threats of imminent deep but inexplicable evil. First I consider Blair Witch Project, in which dread is linked to a mysteriously threatening place. Dread is associated with the unusual powers of a person in The Sixth Sense. My final example, Signs, presents dreadful glimpses of an amoral and apocalyptic cosmos.

The Blair Witch Project and Dreadful Places

The dark Maryland woods is the source of dread in Blair Witch Project, much like the wintry mountain hotel in The Shining or the sacred aborigine rock in Picnic at Hanging Rock.30 As is often true about dreadful places, the forest in Blair Witch is dread-inspiring due to local myths and legends about “primitive” rituals and
chilling murders that have occurred there. *Blair Witch Project* is famously self-conscious in its filming style, of course—it is a horror story about horror stories. Its narrative shows a film-within-the-film about the search for a mythical or legendary focus of horror, the witch of its title.

At the start we see interviews with local people in the small town of Burkittville (formerly Blair) discussing stories of the witch and her legend. This hints that the threat of the witch is real, but not in any consistent or authoritative way. We are also shown sequences filmed in nearby “scary places,” a cemetery and a large rock where a murder occurred. The heroine reads news articles relating the scary stories, about a hermit who killed seven children, or the strange execution of seven men found in a ring of bodies on the rock. These hint at what the youths will find in their increasingly tentative trip into the woods. The threat is again self-consciously reinforced when one character alludes to the film *Deliverance*, another story of urban adventurers stymied by the “bad” primitive forces of red-neck locals.

*Blair Witch Project* sustains suspense with minimal narrative by emphasizing the repetition of these “innocent” protagonists’ days and nights after they get lost in the woods. Outside their tent at night they (and we) hear mysterious sounds of cackling, running steps, a baby’s cry, and finally the screams of one of their group who has disappeared. During the day they see vaguely scary things: twigs hanging from trees in primitive imitations of human form; small stone mounds; slime. The film hints at an evil agent who evidently wins out in the end, striking the final two characters down so that their cameras fall and stop filming. But this agent is never shown. The eerie slime and the strange, ceremonial objects suggest it is the witch of the title. Also interestingly, the victims are not shown, leaving their fates unsettling and unclear. The film’s one brief gory moment is a wavering close-up shot of a small bundle that might contain a bloody human part.

What makes this movie enjoyable? True, it spins a somewhat gripping yarn of suspense. Consider its more cosmic moral significance, however. In the much-publicized scene near the movie’s end (just before the two remaining characters enter an abandoned house to meet their deaths), the heroine, Heather, apologizes profusely and accepts responsibility for making the decisions that have led to disaster. The film could hardly spell things out more than it does. Heather was too confident of her survival skills in the woods and of her map-reading ability. She was too insistent on filming every little thing, putting them in danger by lingering too long, trying to capture things she perhaps should not have. What she does not admit or apologize for is for engaging in the project in the first place. The real problem here is that the youths took on a serious force without proper preparation or respect; it was a lark, just a “project” like a school assignment, or an attempted brush with fame. Because these careless, egocentric youths have gone into much deeper waters than they can fathom, they are shown in the film as, in effect, bringing about the conclusion they deserve. A strong response of dread and horror here requires empathy with the lead characters. Whether one pities or
In The Blair Witch Project, dread is linked to a mysteriously threatening place. The narrative shows a film-within-the-film about the search for a mythical or legendary focus of horror, the witch of its title.

empathizes with them, and whether one finds frightening or boring the long stretches filmed in darkness with not much visible or clearly audible, will determine how much dread the movie inspires.

The Sixth Sense and Dread-Inspiring People

In some movies of art-dread, the dread centers on a person with unusual and eerie powers. This is true of Irena Dubrovna (Simone Simon) in Cat People and of the young boy, Cole Sear (Haley Joel Osment), in Sixth Sense. These dread-inspiring people are still sympathetic, in part because they are objects of dread even to themselves. Both Irena and Cole live lives permeated by dread. Even everyday or happy events in their lives like a birthday party, school play, wedding dinner, or snack in the kitchen can become drenched in danger and terror for them and those around them.

In Sixth Sense Cole lives in constant fear because he sees dead people everywhere. The people address him, many so angry that they hurt him. With the
help of child psychologist Dr. Malcolm Crowe (Bruce Willis), Cole learns to deal with these uncommon entries in his world. The psychiatrist in turn comes to terms with his own “issues.” Dr. Crowe had failed to help a previous patient much like Cole, Vincent (Donnie Wahlberg), who shows up near the start of the movie as a frightened young man who breaks into the Crowes’ home and shoots both Malcolm and himself. This shocking opening has a matched shock near the end when we in the audience realize suddenly, along with Dr. Crowe, that he too is dead—he is among the people reaching out to get Cole to listen and help him. Like other dead people Cole sees throughout the film, this man has died unjustly; he had to leave his wife too soon.

The unusual premise of Sixth Sense is made more plausible by various means. First, the narrative and filmic depiction of events in the story are cleverly ambiguous and open to dual interpretation throughout. Although Dr. Crowe seems to be in many scenes interacting with others, we later realize that people did not actually register his presence. There are many hints that Cole sees Dr. Crowe as one more dead person that he is afraid of. After all, when Cole confesses his secret he says, “I see dead people . . . They don’t know they’re dead . . . They don’t see each other . . . They see what they want to see.”

The eerie yet plausible tale of this movie is sustained by combination of a realistic style with intermittent surreal or expressionist departures. Philadelphia as shown here is an American Gothic city. Its houses are tall and narrow with creepy basements and stairs that wind up into distant tower rooms. Many scenes of the film are framed by close-up shots of gargoyles on fountains or sculptures. The city has a distinguished historical past with the Founding Fathers and all, but was also the scene of injustices like the hanging of innocent people. Sixth Sense is not above using quick shots that provoke a startle reflex, as when a dead girl, Kyra, grabs Cole’s leg from under the bed in her room.

Much credit for evoking horror and dread in Sixth Sense is due to the extraordinary performance of child actor Osment, whose thin little body closes in on itself to escape the dangers around him. He runs through the streets like a gawky baby bird slipping into church to find a safe haven. He even scrambles down the hall at night to the bathroom, seeking [unsuccessfully] to avoid the ghosts that inhabit his house. Cole has a more than usually nasty childhood problem of isolation due to being “different,” as he is called “freak” by his friends and even his teacher. People don’t like him because he scares them. He knows that other people don’t share his predicament and he doesn’t want the one whom he loves most, his mother, to find out, because she too might “look at him like that.”

The movie treats Cole’s unique ability delicately, since nothing is shown of what he sees or knows until after he has confessed his secret to Dr. Crowe, who regards the confession as a sign of psychosis. Then the movie shifts into a more standard horror mode as various dead people Cole sees are also shown onscreen, usually in quick glimpses. With its now-famous twist at the end, The Sixth Sense also unnerves viewers by making Cole’s ability seem more convincing, since we
too have for some time now been watching a dead person, we finally realize—in the leading role, no less. Surely the direct and brutal shot to Malcolm’s stomach shown at the start of the film should have been a clear clue, yet somehow we wanted to believe he is alive. In just the same way, many of us also wish that other likeable people we have lost might still be alive so that we could communicate with them. Of course, this possibility is also decidedly creepy. Willis is atypically understated and sympathetic here as Dr. Crowe, particularly when he realizes he is dead. The thought of a dead person haunting his wife and grieving as he seeks to say goodbye to her is a dread-inspiring one.

Like the other movies I have discussed, *The Sixth Sense* raises issues about justice and cosmic morality. The dead people Cole sees have suffered evil, untimely and violent endings, including a little girl poisoned by her own mother, innocent hanging victims, a battered wife who committed suicide, a bicyclist killed by a car, and Dr. Crowe himself, murdered on a night of romance and celebration. The evil in each case is something we can experience and relate to. Seeing a movie that depicts people suffused with grief, like Malcolm’s wife Anna or the dead girl’s father, is wrenching. This movie “rights wrongs” and restores a sense of meaning as both Cole and the psychiatrist benefit from their unusual friendship. Cole can share his secret with his mom, who finally welcomes his special knowledge of visits from her own dead mother. He also can deal better with the anger of dead people when he realizes that they want him to listen. The poisoned girl’s father can punish his evil wife and save his younger daughter from the dire fate of her sister. And Dr. Crowe perhaps begins to accept his condition and can say a loving goodbye to his wife.\(^{32}\)

**Signs and Apocalyptic Visions**

*Signs* is the story of a man, Graham Hess (Mel Gibson), who is especially upright and even priggish, a former priest. But, like Job, he has been plagued by a random and unbearable series of events: his wife’s death in a car accident, his son’s life-threatening asthma, his daughter’s phobias about drinking water, his brother’s aimlessness. These inexplicable and disturbing events have led him to lose faith and quit his ministry. At the start of the film things turn even worse when mysterious huge crop circles appear in Graham’s cornfield. The family dog goes berserk and attacks his children, and he begins to hear weird noises on the roof at night. These crop signals turn out to be no prank, but harbingers of a murderous and global alien invasion.

The aliens in *Signs* inspire dread because they are extremely powerful, with unusual abilities and indecipherable motives. After imprinting crop circles as apparent landing diagrams all across the planet, they descend over cities in scores of ships protected by force shields. They are tall, green, shadowy, with an
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evil-looking glare and shifty ways of moving and disappearing. Someone speculates on a radio program that they have come not to harvest our planet, "but to harvest us." The dreadful horror in this movie, as in Blair Witch, is interestingly reflexive. An acute moment occurs when Graham's brother Merrill (Joaquin Phoenix), watching TV alone at night, first sees a picture of one of the aliens. His reaction is ramified by the layers of watching depicted in this scene. Merrill sees a news program in which a videotape is screened after a viewer advisory. The tape itself shows watchers, children at a birthday party in Brazil who crowd together and spy out a window trying to spot the alien. When it suddenly appears on screen slipping across a back alley, everyone screams or jumps at once: the children on the video, Merrill, watching the television, and, when I saw the movie, the people in the theater.

The plot of Signs leads up to an apocalyptic scene of threat as the family is trapped all night in their basement resisting a violent alien siege. When his son might die without access to an inhaler, Graham declares his hatred for God, shaking his fist at the deity he no longer believes in. The issue of faith is crucial here. Though this film obviously creates dread, as I have shown, in response to the aliens, I think we must interpret the dread here as being not so much about the aliens as about being left alone in the cosmos with no aid from a benevolent deity. That is, the aliens of Signs are surprisingly like Job's symptoms and traumas in the Bible: they are themselves "signs" of a world without morality, hope, or meaning. They are the temptations thrown up against a good man to cave in to meaninglessness and faithlessness. The dreadful threat in the movie, then, concerns not so much the alien agency per se as whether the cosmos is a moral or amoral place.

Signs offers an unfortunately simplistic resolution to this existential dread. After the hair-raising confrontation with the specific alien invader who has grabbed his son, Graham discovers there is some meaning to the pains of his life. His wife's dying words included a hint of how to fight the invaders, his son's asthma protects him from poison gas, and his daughter's rejected water glasses are key to killing the alien. Coincidences fit into a pattern to show that suffering has a meaning, and Graham ends up literally on his knees with restored faith. Then the film tacks on a sappy coda showing him donning his dog collar, priestly role resumed. Despite this slick ending, I find Signs interesting for its unusually radical depiction of a dreadful human encounter with the deep and unnerving threat of cosmic amorality.

Conclusion: Cosmic Evil and the Appeal of Art-Dread

I have claimed that art-dread in the horror genre is evoked by movies that sustain a mood of suspense and unease as they make plausible the thought of an impending evil that is particularly profound, or of out-and-out cosmic amorality. A movie
will be effective insofar as it makes this threat both sustained and convincing, utilizing narrative plus other cinematic devices. The horror we feel at such films typically concerns evil that remains implied rather than depicted, or a vague but intense sense of unease.33

I have argued that this kind of film is enjoyable because it grapples with deep and difficult issues, following in a long and honorable human tradition of art that addresses suffering and evil. Movies of art-dread sustain audience interest by showing how human beings, whether sympathetic and good or not, cope or fail to cope in their encounters with deep and profound evil, or with a fear of life's arbitrariness and meaninglessness. Such films can be enjoyable when they allow us to reflect on fundamental human questions about whether the world is a good, bad, or indifferent place—whether it allows for possibilities of moral behavior.

Some movies of art-dread are very dark. In some cases we might want something bad to happen, not for perverse reasons but because it is somehow right or fitting. That is, if the primary characters are portrayed as having somehow "sinned" or committed crimes or violations, or lost faith, perhaps they deserve the bad that threatens them. This explanation has a surprising resonance for some of the films I have been discussing. In Blair Witch Project evil befalls the young video makers because they are transgressors who lack appropriate respect for the mysterious powers of the woods and the "witch" that inhabits them. They embarked on a serious journey of exploration with only the most superficial preparations and have a typical consumerist, vouyeristic attitude toward their investigation. It is surprising how often such films, like Signs, hint that their apocalyptic events are somehow warranted by the bad behavior or inconstancy of people.

Although movies that wind up more "affirmatively" would seem on the surface more appealing than the more negative, ones, it is still interesting and somehow may ring more true with us to consider the most dire possible construal of our cosmos. In films like Blair Witch Project, as in Cat People and The Others, some of the humans seem to be defeated by dark forces of the cosmos. Even Sixth Sense has an ending that is unsettling and not altogether "happy" since Malcolm and Cole must say a final goodbye, and Malcolm must also finally leave his wife and be truly "dead." But in truth, sometimes good people simply do experience dread in life, like Job, after suffering a series of very bad things with no apparent explanation or no moral justification. There are no guarantees that the world is not a dreadful place.

NOTES

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1. For more examples, see also chapter 7 ("Uncanny Horror") of my book The Naked and the Undead: Evil and the Appeal of Horror (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1999).


6. Ibid., 40.

7. Ibid., 40-41.

8. Freeland, The Naked and the Undead. Robert Solomon too thinks that “if art-horror is or can be quite entertaining, it is precisely because it is not horror” (Solomon, “Real Horror,” in Dark Thoughts: Philosophic Reflections on Cinematic Horror. ed. Steven Jay Schneider and Daniel Shaw [Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow, 2003], 229–262.


10. Carroll, Philosophy of Horror, 41; emphasis mine.

11. Ibid., 42.

12. The nature of “theory” in film studies is much disputed, see my “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Film,” in Film and Philosophy: Film and Philosophy, ed. Ludwig Nagl, Eva Waniek, and Brigitte Mayr (Vienna, Synema: 2004).


18. Burke’s account should not be confused with Kant’s notion of the sublime, which is more of a mix of pain with pleasure, and more morally uplifting, or Kant, see my “The Sublime in Cinema” in Passionate Views, ed. Carl Planting and Greg Smith (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 65–83.


20. For Burke, both the sublime and the beautiful have physiological sources, with the sublime involving bodily tension, and the beautiful, relaxation. This corresponds to modern views that our emotion systems operate independently of cognitive systems in responding to danger.


23. Ibid.


26. Tan summarizes various views in Emotion and the Structure of Narrative Film, 228ff.
27. Carroll, Philosophy of Horror, 4.
30. Jonathan Rayner, in "‘Terror Australis’: Areas of Horror in the Australian Cinema," in Horror International, ed. Steven Jay Schneider and Tony Williams (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, forthcoming 2004) comments on how depictions of the Australian landscape as an anti-Eden in such films links it with "portrayals of monstrous rurality in contemporary American horror films, such as The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (Tobe Hooper, 1974) and The Hills Have Eyes (Wes Craven, 1977).
31. This is a requirement that lost me, as I could barely wait for them to die.
32. See also Marguerite LaCaze, "The Mourning of Loss in The Sixth Sense," in Post Script: Essays in Film and the Humanities, Special Issue: Realist Horror Cinema 21, no. 3, ed. Steven Jay Schneider (Summer 2002): 111–121.