

Genre Identification and the Case of Horror

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ABSTRACT. In this paper I consider Noël Carroll's definition of the horror genre. I argue that although Carroll's account has a number of advantages, it cannot fully explain some of the most important features of the genre. After explicating Carroll's theory I first argue that his monster based definition is over exclusive, because events may also possess the features that — according to his account — make monsters threatening and impure. I also argue that Carroll is mistaken about the criteria for what it is to be art-horrified, for the description or enactment of character's responses will not necessarily provide us with sufficient criteria. Finally I will suggest that Carroll did not provide us with a sufficient explanation for the "paradox of horror", that is, for the question why we find works of horror interesting at all. I argue that we can find all the relevant interesting features in science fiction without the fear and disgust horror monsters are designed to elicit, therefore Carroll's theory does not explain why audiences often prefer works of horror to science fiction, or why they read or watch works of horror in the first place.

In *The Philosophy of Horror* (1990) Noël Carroll provides a definition of the horror genre that is based on the specific emotion, art-horror, that works belonging to the genre are designed to elicit. The analysis (in Chapter 1) proceeds by offering a theory of emotions first, and then by explaining the specific features works of horror must possess in order to elicit the emotion art-horror. In Chapter 4 Carroll gives an explanation of how and why audiences can find horror fictions pleasurable. The question is raised because such works seem to be distressful and unpleasant by na-

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ture.¹ Throughout his book, Carroll never fails to impress his reader by the enormous amount of examples, drawn from works of diverse media and historical periods, from Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* to the then most recent release of the *Alien* series.

According to Carroll's exposition², it is generally accepted that the genre evolved in the eighteenth century from popular Gothic novels, especially from "supernatural" Gothic, and since then it has been present in various media; novels, short stories, plays, even ballet, and in the twentieth century, movies and comic books as well. Paradigmatic examples include the aforementioned *Frankenstein* and the *Alien* series, Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Wild's *Picture of Dorian Grey*, Stoker's *Dracula*, Stephen King's *It* (and all the movie adaptations of these works), *The Twilight Zone*, etc. Furthermore, although the genre has been continuously present since its appearance, its popularity seems to be cyclic; the present cycle started roughly in the mid-seventies.³

Carroll characterizes and identifies the genre by its specific effect. Art-horror is argued to be the emotive response that works of the genre are designed to elicit from audiences. The emotional state in question is argued to be an occurrent emotion (not a disposition), consisting of a physical and a cognitive component. The physical dimension is a feeling of agitation; it is a necessary component of emotions, but it is neither characteristic of some specific emotions, nor is it argued to be constant on different occasions. For example, the (abnormal) physical state that accompanies being afraid may vary not only individually, but one may also be in different physical states on different occasions of being afraid. The reason for why some physical dimension is necessary is that the emotion is to be differentiated from the merely cognitive state of registering enemy, for example. (Computers and Vulcans in *Star Trek* are argued to lack

¹ The account also involves an explanation of the general question of how we can be moved by fictions; how we can fear fictional characters, how we can be moved by their fates, etc. (Chapter 2), and a detailed overview of the major types of horror plot structures (Chapter 3). I will not discuss these issues here.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 12-58.

³ The historical evolution of the genre has no significance for the present analysis, and it is also not difficult to identify paradigmatic examples, therefore, I will not spend more time on this question.

emotions precisely because they lack the physically felt agitation accompanying the cognitive aspect of emotions.) Emotions are individuated by their cognitive components, beliefs and thoughts, that is, by the cognitive state causing the physical state. The cognitive state consists of factual and evaluative components; for example, I am afraid because I realize that a mountain lion is approaching me (factual component) and I believe that mountain lions are extremely dangerous (evaluative component).

The explanation of the identifying emotion that works of horror are designed to elicit is given as follows.

Assuming that “I-as-audience-member” am in an analogous emotional state to that which fictional characters beset by monsters are described to be in, then: I am occurrently art-horrified by some monster X, say Dracula, if and only if 1) I am in some state of abnormal physically felt agitation (shuddering, tingling, screaming, etc.) which 2) has been *caused* by a) the thought: that Dracula is a possible being; and by the evaluative thoughts: that b) said Dracula has the property of being physically (and perhaps morally and socially) threatening in the ways portrayed in the fiction and that c) said Dracula has the property of being impure, where 3) such thoughts are usually accompanied by the desire to avoid the touch of things like Dracula.⁴

Being in an analogous state to the one which positive human characters in fiction are portrayed to be in does not mean character-identification. Audience members are not argued to “identify” with characters of fiction for several reasons⁵, but probably most importantly because while the human protagonists in the fiction believe that the monster exists, audience members do not believe that. The emotions of the audience are prompted by the responses of the positive human characters in the fiction (by their expressions of fear, disgust, etc.), but the emotions of the audience only parallel the emotions of the characters; the existential (or factual) belief is not a component of the audience’s state, only that the monster is a (logi-

⁴ Ibid., p. 27.

⁵ It is argued later that our mental state cannot be the “duplicate” of the mental state of the protagonist, for we may well feel suspense when the hero is occupied fighting the monster, we may be concerned (we see the attacking shark) while the heroine is still happily splashing about, etc. (cf. *ibid.*, p. 90-92).

cally) possible being.⁶ It is the evaluative component of the cognitive state that the audience and the characters “share”; the monster is thought to be dangerous and impure.

To summarize, the identifying features of art-horror are that the monster in the fiction is threatening and impure. It is argued that these features will distinguish works of horror from works belonging to other genres; monsters can appear in fairy tales, but they are not dangerous; natural disasters are dangerous in disaster movies, but they are not impure monsters, etc. The condition of being threatening is straightforward and easily established in any fiction; the monster kills people, or shows some clear signs of such an attempt, for example. Impurity is understood as categorical contradictoriness; it “involves a conflict between two or more standing cultural categories”⁷. Such contradiction may be achieved 1) by the fusion of ordinarily disjoint or conflicting categories into a spatio-temporally unified character (Frankenstein’s creature, the Borg in *Star Trek*), 2) by the fission of what is ordinarily unified (there is temporal fission, such as Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, and spatial fission, such as doppelgangers, there are periodic identity changes, such as shape shifters, werewolves, etc.), 3) by magnification of creatures already considered disgusting (huge spiders, etc.), 4) by massification (millions of ants or bees, usually possessing impossible intelligence as well), and 5) by “horrific metonymy” (the monster is a “normal-looking” Dracula, but is surrounded by rats, skeletons, etc.). The list of these possible structures is not meant to be exhaustive, although Carroll holds that most horror monsters can be analyzed by them. Also, as it was mentioned before, such monsters may appear in fictions that do not belong to the horror genre. In those cases, however, they are either non-threatening or their impurity is considered to be “natural” in the fictional

⁶ As I mentioned before, in Chapter 2 Carroll offers an explanation to the “paradox of fiction”, that is, an answer to the question of how we can have emotional responses to fictional characters that we know do not exist. It is not my task here to evaluate that argument, so let us merely note that the factual belief (concerning existence) in this case is replaced by the thought of the monster, i.e. by the thought that it is a (logically) possible being. That is, Carroll holds that one can be emotionally moved (frightened, etc.) by the content of the thought (of Dracula, for example), if it is accompanied by relevant evaluative beliefs, e.g. that the said being is threatening (and in case of art-horror impure as well).

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

world, not as a violation of standing cultural categories; characters do not react to those monsters with fear and disgust. Since — according to Carroll's account — the evaluative beliefs of the audiences are prompted by the reaction of the characters to the monsters, the emotion of art-horror is not elicited in cases when monsters are understood as normal (“natural”) creatures of the fictional world in question.

Identifying the horror genre by art-horror, the emotion such fictions are designed to elicit, and explaining art-horror in terms of the properties of monsters, such as being threatening and impure, and hence eliciting fear and disgust, lead us to what Carroll calls the “paradox of horror”.⁸ The question is why people enjoy being art-horrified. The genre, so Carroll points out,

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 [sic!] them?” or “How can horror audiences find pleasure in what by nature is distressful and unpleasant?”⁹

Carroll considers and rejects three ways of providing a general and universal answer to this question. He argues that art-horror cannot be analogous, in general, to religious experience, it cannot be some “cosmic fear” that is connected to awe, for there are many works that are not connected to any world view, and there is no reason to suppose that religious experience is not available without the repulsiveness of horror. Also, Carroll argues that psychoanalytic analyses cannot show that there is always some repressed material (repressed sexual or other desire, repressed knowledge, such as the nature of beings that cannot exist according to the standing cultural categories), for many monsters are merely never thought of before, and there is no clear psychic value in the putative repression of such thoughts. Finally, it is also denied that horror always has an ideological role of being

⁸ Ibid., pp. 158-195.

⁹ Ibid., p. 159.

the agent of the established (cultural, social, political) order by portraying violations of standing cultural categories as threatening and impure, for it is argued that not only many works have politically and socially progressive themes, but also, serving the “status quo” would still not necessarily entail that audiences find the genre attractive.¹⁰

The explanation Carroll gives for the paradox of horror is the following. First, it is argued that the putative inexplicability of the monster (it is an “impossible” being in terms of the standing cultural categories¹¹) elicits curiosity; the monster is not only threatening and impure, but it is also interesting. Monsters are natural objects of curiosity, and therefore, their contextualization in narrative structures provides the audience with a special kind of cognitive pleasure through the narrative structure; the discovering, proving, confirming, disclosing, etc.,¹² of the existence of the “impossible” is interesting, because our curiosity is aroused by the monster. Of course, it can be argued that the desire to know is elicited by all narratives in some form; at least we may want to know the outcome of the interactions in the narrative, but curiosity obviously plays an important role in detective stories, fictions involving suspense, etc. As Carroll argues, however, the arousal of curiosity in horror fictions can be distinguished from other narratives by the role of the monster.

[H]orror 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.¹³

¹⁰ Carroll does not argue that these approaches may not be applicable for specific works, or even sub-categories in the horror genre; what he denies is that they can provide a comprehensive explanation of the attractiveness of the genre. I will not discuss these arguments in any more detail, for that is beyond the scope of this paper; I will rather concentrate on Carroll’s positive argument.

¹¹ The monster is not logically impossible, for as we saw above, the audience must think that the monster is a (logically) possible being. Impossibility here means the violation of standing cultural categories.

¹² In Chapter 3 of his book, Carroll gives an elaborate overview of the major types of horror plots, and also connects such plots with suspense.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

The suggested solution to the “paradox of horror” is the following. Although the determining feature of the genre is the emotion art-horror, we do not seek such works to be art-horrified; rather, we pay the price (of being art-horrified) for engendering and engaging our curiosity in the special kind of way that is only available by discovering and disclosing the properties of monsters. For the cognitive pleasure offered by works of horror is functionally related to monsters that are being frightening and impure, but are also fascinating.¹⁴

Carroll offers an inspiring account both in terms of the nature of the horror genre and the possible reason why people enjoy works of horror. There are, however, several problems with his arguments that should make us careful to accept his theory as a comprehensive explanation.

The first issue I wish to consider is what I take to be an arbitrary over-exclusive feature of the account. The theory is argued to be a core theory that accommodates most examples that pre-theoretically seem to belong to the genre. In some cases the account explains why a seemingly plausible candidate, such as Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, is not horror (there is no monster in it, our curiosity is directed to the pathological not to the “impossible”), while also being able to explain the work’s close resemblance to the genre. I will not contest such borderline cases here. There is, however, a type of fiction that is excluded from the genre for being “event-based” rather than “entity-based” (i.e., “monster-based”). Such excluded stories¹⁵ may involve uncanny, terrifying events, the characters may suspect (realize, etc.) that unknown and inexplicable forces rule the universe, nevertheless, no monster appears in the fiction. Carroll argues that this type of fiction (that he calls “tales of dread”) elicit a sense of unease, awe and anxiety, but not

¹⁴ Because the fascinating properties of monsters are central in the explanation, Carroll also holds that the explanation may be extended to works that do not involve narrative plotting. Although monsters fit and mobilize narrative structures in a unique way that distinguishes the genre from other narratives that also arouse curiosity, it is the “impossible” properties of monsters themselves that fascinate us. Such curiosity, however, can be also elicited by pictures that lack narrative structure, by pure confrontation plots in which discovery and disclosure play little, if any role, etc. For this reason, the explanation is argued to be comprehensive (as opposed to the rejected accounts, which, for different reasons, failed to offer a comprehensive explanation of the “paradox of horror”).

¹⁵ E.g. Guy de Maupassant’s “Who Knows?” that involves the inexplicable disappearance and reappearance of the narrator’s furniture.

art-horror, for they do not involve disgust, the result of the impurity of monsters in his account.¹⁶

The reason why I think it is arbitrary to exclude these works from the genre is that they are still plausible candidates for eliciting the emotion art-horror (the identifying characteristics of the genre). It seems obvious that events can be frightening and threatening; this is not what Carroll denies.¹⁷ However, he doesn't consider that events can be impure as well in the very sense the impurity of monsters is explained. Events may not be "disgusting" in the ordinary sense, but monsters were argued to be only likely, not necessarily, disgusting by virtue of their "impurity". A shape shifter monster, for example, may appear in any form that is attractive to humans, without ceasing to be impure in terms of categorical contradictoriness. Even in the definition quoted earlier, Carroll only suggests that the thought of the monster is usually, but not always accompanied by the desire to avoid the touch of it. And events may certainly be "unnatural" or "impossible" in terms of violating the standing conceptual scheme.¹⁸ That is, events may not only be "threatening", but they can be "impure" as well, which is the other component in eliciting the emotion art-horror. The construction of such events is different from the constructions of monsters; the methods of fusion, fission, etc. are likely to be replaced by methods of horrific event construction that are specific to events, rather than entities. I will not attempt to produce a taxonomy of horrific event construction here. Nevertheless, if I am right that not only entities (monsters) can be threatening and impure (in the sense of violating cultural categories), but events as well, then they may also elicit the emotion art-horror, for they satisfy the identifying features of art-horror

¹⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 41-42.

¹⁷ For instance, we can modify the previous example. If objects can inexplicably disappear and reappear, it is not too difficult to construct events that are threatening. Randomly and inexplicably disappearing and reappearing objects may cause many injuries and deaths; it only depends on the imagination of a scriptwriter how diverse and terrible such injuries and deaths might be. By increasing the occurrence of such events, disaster is foreseeable. It is likely that there are, in fact, movies resembling this scenario, for example, but I will rely on a hypothetical example here.

¹⁸ My previous example of inexplicably disappearing and reappearing objects would be considered impossible and unnatural; moreover, such events would certainly violate the standing conceptual scheme.

(danger and impurity), even if they are not considered “disgusting” in the way trash, or slimy, crawling, etc. creatures can be considered disgusting.¹⁹ And if this is correct, and the genre is to be identified by the emotion the works belonging to it are designed to elicit, then I can see no reason to exclude the event-based fictions in question.

Another feature of the account I find in need of explanation is the following. Let us assume that the proposed individuation of the emotions (by their cognitive elements, i.e., factual and evaluative thoughts) is plausible, and also that the genre is to be identified by the emotion works of horror are designed to elicit.²⁰ However, the emphasis on the emotions of human protagonists in the fiction seems to suggest that the question whether or not a work belongs to the genre is determined by the portrayed reactions of the human characters in the fiction.

Let me explain why I find this problematic. As we saw earlier, the emotions of the audience to the monster are argued to be prompted by the expressed emotional responses of the positive human characters in the fiction. That is, the evaluative beliefs of the audience are shaped by (more precisely, *determined by*) how the characters react to the monster. This is how we can realize that the monster is to be considered threatening and impure while watching a horror movie, but we can also consider the monster (possibly possessing the very same visual characteristics as a monster in a horror movie) friendly and “natural” in the fictional world of a fairy tale. Concerning the relation between the emotion of the audience and the portrayed responses of the characters to monsters, Carroll argues

¹⁹ But again, monsters were not argued to be necessarily disgusting in this sense either; their “impurity” likely entails that, but it is the violation of the standing conceptual scheme that is an identifying feature of monsters, not that they are necessarily disgusting in some ordinary sense.

²⁰ That is, I will not question those points here. There may be better analyses of emotions, and one may also think that the horror genre is not to be identified with the emotion such fictions are designed to elicit. But I rather direct my attention to specific points of the account than to the construction of fundamentally distinct theories. As I mentioned before, I will not discuss Carroll’s theory of the general issue of emotional responses to fiction either, for my question is specifically about the definition of the genre (Chapter 1 of Carroll’s book) and the explanation of the paradox of horror (Chapter 4). Hence, the view that the objects of our emotional responses to fictions are thought contents will not be discussed here either.

that the work of art-horror has built into it, so to speak, a set of instructions about the appropriate way the audience is to respond to it. These instructions are manifested, by example, in the responses of the positive, human characters to the monsters in horror fiction. We learn what is to be art-horrified in large measure from the fiction itself; indeed, the very criteria for what it is to be art-horrified can be found in the fiction in the description or enactment of the human character's responses. Works of horror, that is, teach us, in large measure, the appropriate way to respond to them.²¹

There are, however, some problems with this proposal. Although Carroll does not want to say that we know how to respond to the work exclusively from the character's responses, such responses are in fact ascribed an identifying function (cf. the difference between horror fictions and fairy tales). This is a plausible suggestion, and likely applies to most works. However, there may be horror fictions in which characters do not respond (at least for a long time) to the monster in any way that could prompt our emotive responses. For example, a monster (e.g. a shape shifter with some extraordinary hypnotic abilities) could appear to the characters as a friendly acquaintance, induce them to fall asleep (without frightening them) and then may zombify them (or kill them, etc.). The characters may never encounter the monster in a situation where their response would provide us with the instruction concerning how to evaluate and respond to the monster (this would be a very unusual horror story for sure, but still, it would be one), or, more plausibly, they may only discover (confront, etc.) the monster (and hence, respond to it in a way that could prompt the audience's response) *long after* the point when the audience was already art-horrified; say, long after the first portrayed attack of the aforementioned monster.²² The point is that we can be art-horrified, have the adequate evaluative beliefs and respond to the monster as threatening and impure without being prompted by the responses of the characters. If I am correct, then Carroll is mistaken about the criteria for what it is to be art-horrified; the descrip-

²¹ Ibid., p. 31.

²² Although this is a hypothetical example again, probably there are several actual works that would illustrate my point just as well. The work (e.g. movie) based on this kind of monster may well be (although not necessarily) very boring. But this is not the question here, for it would still be a (boring, bad, etc.) horror fiction.

tion or enactment of character's response will not necessarily provide us with such criteria (although those responses may often play an important, maybe even exclusive role).

Neither of these objections must be fatal to Carroll's definition; the account may well be extended and modified to include event-based works, and sufficient criteria may be found for what it is to be art-horrified when such criteria is not given by the character's response. My criticisms here pointed at certain weaknesses of the theory, but did not render the whole project hopeless. Concerning the "paradox of horror", however, I think Carroll failed to provide even a promising explanation.

My reason for denying that the "paradox of horror" is solved is that engendering curiosity simply does not distinguish horror fictions from some works of science fiction. Certainly, as Carroll argues, many science fictions in fact belong to the horror genre. Monsters (aliens) in science fiction, however, do not have to be dangerous; they can be non-threatening and still be interesting in the very sense horror monsters are argued to be fascinating. The "categorical contradictoriness" (or "impurity") of monsters is not necessarily repulsive, especially if the monster is not threatening. This is precisely why friendly (or merely non-threatening) aliens are fascinating in science fiction; they are classificatory misfits exactly in the same way as horror monsters are. The problem for Carroll's solution to the paradox of horror is that these aliens will elicit the same kind of curiosity that was argued to be specific to the horror genre; moreover, they do so *without* being repulsive (in terms of being threatening), that is, without eliciting art-horror. If this is correct, then Carroll no longer has the explanation that the audience pays the price of being art-horrified for the goods delivered by the fascinating properties of monsters. Aliens in non-horror science fiction may engender the same kind of curiosity without eliciting art-horror.

It might be the case that audiences are willing to pay the price of being art-horrified because there are not "enough" fascinating non-horror science fiction works available. In that case, Carroll is right about "paying the price", but he is mistaken about claiming that what audiences enjoy in works of horror is specific to the genre. That is, horror may merely be a substitute for non-horror science fiction (where there is no such "price" involved). However, if one thinks that the attractiveness of the genre must

also be specific to it, then the account should explain why audiences enjoy being *art-horrified*. And Carroll's proposed solution to the paradox of horror fails to do that.

References

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