

## The Horror! The Horror!

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Horror stories are about engagement. About actual experience, instead of simulated, false experience . . . it's about discovering one's ability to feel in certain ways, and deepening and widening one's emotional experience by that means. Unease is never not worth experiencing. Unease is a genuinely perceptive, accurate response to the underlying structures of the universe. I don't think we're safe, I don't think the world cares about us.

—Peter Straub (in Clasen)

You're trapped. Some monstrous and malevolent force—weird, alien, and hideous—is about to take your life, devour your flesh, and consume your soul.



Figure 1. A highly attention-demanding alpha predator from *Van Helsing* (2004)

Are you having fun? Probably not, and yet, vast hordes of people read books and go to movies designed specifically to create simulations of such experiences. Why? Most theorists of film and literature have tried to answer this question by appealing to Freudian psychoanalysis, cultural contexts, or both. They have on the whole invoked obsolete models of the human mind and neglected evolutionary findings on human nature. We can do better.

Academic horror scholarship has roughly been divided into two groups: the Freudian approach, which takes psychoanalysis as an organizing paradigm; and historicist approaches, which are based on culturally constructivist interpretations. However, within the past decade or so, many fields (e.g., psychology, anthropology, religion, and literary study) have benefited from taking the adaptationist view that the human mind evolved and that it is an adaptive organ (Barkow, Cosmides, and Tooby; Pinker). Horror scholarship too can take advantage of the enormous advances in knowledge about human nature.

It's true that individual works of horror should be seen in their historical, cultural context. A work of horror always invokes locally and historically contingent anxieties. Nonetheless, horror varies within a very narrow range because there are only so many ways to effectively scare the human animal. The genre displays a certain uniformity, one which easily and frequently is overlooked by critics and commentators who are intent on unveiling the cultural or subconscious fears and anxieties which have metamorphosed into monsters. A purely constructivist account of horror fiction cannot explain why horror fiction generally travels well in space—why Western teenagers are scared witness by Japanese and Korean horror movies, for instance. And a Freudian approach, based on false ideas about human nature, can explain little, if anything at all.

#### WHAT IS HORROR?

Horror fiction is designed to scare or disturb its audience, and the label covers two subcategories: supernatural horror fiction, which uses supernatural props such as ghosts, curses, and non-natural monsters and takes place in narrative

universes which are to some degree counterempirical; and psychological horror fiction, which is largely mimetic (if often melodramatic or romantic). Sometimes the categories are indistinct: The work is characterized by an ontological ambiguity, wherein the reader (and often the characters) wavers between a naturalistic and a supernatural explanation (e.g., Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*).

Even as horror is not defined according to content but rather affectively (in terms of intended audience reaction), a limited stock of situations and characters makes up most horror stories. As the historian David J. Skal has observed, "very little about the underlying structure of horror images really changes, though our cultural uses for them are . . . shape-changing" (23). How can we account for the fact that a genre that is supposed to be, in the words of the critic Douglas E. Winter, "a progressive form of fiction, one that evolves to meet the fears and anxieties of its times" is so obsessed with a few themes and figures? Presumably, it is because certain things (e.g., darkness, death, malevolent ghosts, humanoid predators) are scarier than others. But why? Why is darkness scary? And why are monsters, vampires, ghouls, and ghosts scary?

#### THE ORIGINS OF HORROR

One might expect at least *supernatural* horror fiction to gradually disappear concurrently with enlightenment and education. That does not seem to be the case, however, as horror remains one of the most profitable and popular film genres (Gomery 49).

To understand the nature of horror, it is essential to recognize that modern horror fiction is evolved from earlier, recognizably similar kinds of stories. The writer H. P. Lovecraft found the roots of the modern horror story in "the earliest folklore of all races" and charted its development from folktales via the Gothic novel to the modern tale of terror. Horror is not, exactly, a social or cultural construction, but rather a predictable product of an evolved human nature. Horror is what happens when *Homo sapiens* meets the world; it is a "natural" genre, not the chance product of an unusual mind or a specific set of cultural circumstances.

As Lovecraft asserted, "the horror-tale is as old as human thought and speech themselves." This, he explained, is "naturally [to be] expected of a form so closely connected with primal emotion" (17).

#### ORTHODOX APPROACHES TO HORROR FICTION: CONSTRUCTIVISM . . .

Many historians and critics of horror fiction implicitly or explicitly place the birth of the genre on Christmas Day in 1764, with the publication of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, the first "Gothic novel." The genesis of the horror story is thus often seen as a symptomatic byproduct of the Enlightenment. In this widely popular historicist approach, Gothic fiction—seen as the precursor of modern horror fiction—is the white underbelly of the Enlightenment, a subversive venue of expression for all things repressed in the eighteenth century and henceforth.

If horror were a purely cultural construction, an entirely fortuitous invention, it would follow that cultures without horror stories could (and more likely than not, *do*) exist, and that one culture's horror stories would work only inside that culture or similar ones. Neither seems to be the case. Most historicist accounts of the horror genre as a whole and of specific works of horror contain some truth, but they are inadequate.

#### . . . AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

The Freudian approach to horror fiction, on the other hand, appears to me not only inadequate but also false, simply because orthodox psychoanalytical theory has not been borne out by scientific investigation. In 1996, Edward Erwin noted that approximately 1,500 Freudian experiments had been conducted over six decades, yet "the amount of confirmation of distinctly Freudian hypotheses is close to zero" (294).

The classical *locus* for Freudian horror scholars is Freud's essay "The Uncanny" from 1919. In his discussion of "the uncanny," a category which encompasses horror stories, Freud claimed that the uncanny experience "arises either when repressed childhood complexes are revived by

some impression, or when primitive beliefs that have been *surmounted* appear to be once again confirmed" (155). Thus, the basic Freudian approach to horror stories is to uncover the repressed elements, the infantile complexes or cultural repressions, which are disguised as for example supernatural monsters (e.g., Wood). In this analysis, horror stories are not really about monsters and ghosts at all; those are mere symbols or symptoms to be penetrated in order to deal with repressed materials.

Freudian horror study claims a mostly unwarranted crypto-sexual, perverse dimension to the genre. For example, Elaine Showalter reads Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* as a "fable of fin-de-siècle homosexual panic, the discovery and resistance of the homosexual self" (107). This, surely, is a historicist-psychosexual reading gone utterly berserk. To anyone but a high-strung Freudian critic, would the fact that Hyde travels in "chocolate-brown fog" be "suggestive of anal and anal intercourse" (113)?

Freudian approaches, like the historicist ones, look behind the literal level of horror fictions to find the power and significance of the work. Both approaches are involved in a process of discovery, of locating some meaning that, at first sight, is hidden to the uninitiated beholder; both require some extraneous knowledge (psychoanalysis is more esoteric, requiring an altogether more arcane body of knowledge). However, whatever else is going on in a given work of horror, horror stories should *also* be taken at face value since readers and viewers also and foremost experience scary stories on the literal level. To reduce a work of horror to cultural undercurrents or a particular *Zeitgeist*, or to repressed fantasies and complexes, is to miss a very important part of the picture.

#### EVOLUTIONARY STUDIES OF HORROR FICTION

Surprisingly, the evolutionary approach to horror fiction is largely unexplored territory, but a few attempts at explaining the horror genre in an evolutionary framework have been advanced.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the earliest attempt to view horror from an evolutionary perspective comes from a master

of the genre, H. P. Lovecraft. In his long essay *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (largely composed from 1925 to 1927), Lovecraft invoked man's biological inheritance and asserted that "the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear" (12). Consequently, he claimed that horror "has always existed, and always will exist" (15) This account clashes spectacularly with the purely historicist conception of scary stories, according to which, presumably, horror could vanish at any moment. As Kendrick wrote in 1991, horror fiction "seems about to emit its last gasp" (xxv). That has not happened, and I don't think it is likely to happen ever. Certainly, the genre waxes and wanes like any other cultural phenomenon, but a particular aspect of human nature will always be receptive to a wholesome (or unwholesome) scare.

#### FEAR AND ANXIETY

Fear is a human universal, one of the basic emotions, universally recognizable in facial expression; and it has a distinct physiological signature.



Figure 2. A terrified girl, lost and preyed upon in dark and alien woods (*Blair Witch Project*, 1999)

All this displays the hand of natural selection. As Arne Öhman puts it, "responses of fear and anxiety originate in an alarm system shaped by evolution to protect creatures from impending danger. This system is biased to discover threat, and it results in a sympathetically dominated response as a support of potential flight or fight" (587). The bias to discover threat means we tend to overreact, perceiving threats where none exist (Marks and Nesse 254). If we jump at a shadow and run away, we might expend unnecessary energy. If we don't jump and run, we might get eaten.

Fear has a range of characteristic physical symptoms (250–51), and it stands to reason that the reaction elicited by an effective horror story is qualitatively similar to that elicited by a real threat from a predator, for example. Cinematic horror is probably more efficient in causing outright fear and startle responses, whereas literary horror is usually more dependent on less violent—if no less powerful—emotions such as dread and anxiety.

"Fears and phobias fall into a short and universal list," as Steven Pinker notes. These include snakes, spiders, "heights, storms, large carnivores, darkness, blood, strangers, confinement, deep water, social scrutiny, and leaving home alone." The "common thread is obvious. These are the situations that put our evolutionary ancestors in danger" (386). And what's more, many of the items on Pinker's list pose no threat to urban dwellers. The lifetime odds of dying from "contact with venomous snakes and lizards" in the United States are 1 in 544,449, whereas the lifetime odds of dying from a transport accident are 1 in 79 ("Odds of Dying"). And yet car-phobia is virtually nonexistent. Matt Ridley is surely right that it "defies common sense not to see the handiwork of evolution here: the human brain is pre-wired to learn fears that were of relevance in the Stone Age" (194). That the spider's status as a repulsive (or at the very least, fascinating) animal is a consequence of evolution—spiders, by being dangerous, exerted a selective pressure for spider-detection and avoidance mechanisms in our ancestors (Rakison and Derringer)—is far more plausible than the notion that spiders become objects of cultural elaboration and repugnance because they symbolize the vagina,

the penis, the oral-sadistic mother, or “the hairy hands of masturbation” (Carroll, “Nightmare” 22, 24–25).

## MONSTERS

To get at the reality of horror, we have to embrace the monster. Some monster or monstrous entity dominates virtually all horror fiction. That’s true even when the ontological status of the monster is ambiguous, as it is, for example, is Shirley Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House*, when it is not witnessed at all, as in *The Blair Witch Project*, or when some sort of supernatural, homicidal agency is just intimated, as in the *Final Destination* series. The monster is of course threatening but also “impure” (Carroll, *Philosophy* 42–43). Very often it is disgusting as well as frightening. Long before Pasteur discovered the germ theory of disease, our instinctive repulsion for feces and decomposing corpses protected us from infectious diseases (Curtis et al. 131).

Surveying worldwide anthropological data on folklore monsters, David Gilmore finds monsters everywhere. “People everywhere and at all times have been haunted by ogres, cannibal giants, metamorphs, werewolves, vampires, and so on” (ix). Universal monster characteristics include “great size and/or strength; a prominent mouth with fangs or some other means of facilitating predation on humans; an urge to consume human flesh and/or blood; and hybridism” (in Saler and Ziegler 220). No surprise, really. According to David Quammen, “among the earliest forms of human self-awareness was the awareness of being meat” (3). No one wants to be someone else’s dinner. Horror stories thus brim with modified “alpha predators” such as werewolves and vampires. As Ketelaar puts it, “often [the] supernatural monsters [of horror movies] are depicted as little more than solitary ambush predators dressed up in culturally contrived monster attire” (740; and see Scalise Sugiyama).

## HYBRID HORRORS

Evolutionists will hardly be surprised at the claim that our horror stories are populated by ancestral dangers. They might still wonder, though, why so many horror monsters

are “interstitial” or hybridized (Carroll, *Philosophy* 32)? The best answer seems to be that provided by the evolutionary study of religion—the idea that belief in the supernatural is a natural by-product of the adapted mind (Atran and Norenzayan; Barrett; Boyer). Religion is a kind of parasite that exploits our evolved cognitive architecture. Entities that combine features from two or more natural categories are likely to command attention, be vividly remembered, and be extensively transmitted. Atran and Norenzayan use the term “taxonomic anomalies” (715). Such anomalies combine features from categories such as human/animal (e.g., werewolves, zombies) and alive/dead (e.g., vampires, ghosts).

Many scholars have noted this characteristic feature but have usually explained it by invoking Mary Douglas’s theory of disgust and taboo (e.g., Carroll, *Philosophy*; Gilmore). Douglas argues that entities violating established cultural categories can be threatening. We now have a plausible explanation for why that is. Supernatural horror stories can affect even hardheaded skeptics because supernatural agents have a peculiar resonance with the human mind—despite the apparent lack of predation pressures from vampires and ghouls in ancestral environments. Peter Straub, who has penned many best-selling supernatural horror stories, explains, “I probably don’t believe in anything supernatural . . . but my *imagination* really believes in it” (in Clasen).

Alpha predators are scary in their own right, but spiders and snakes, so remote from the human morph, offer special opportunities to the artist of horror. Stephen King’s *It* contains a spider which is “perhaps fifteen feet high” (1029). Consider the Kali-monster in Dan Simmons’ *Song of Kali*, which “crouched on six limbs like some huge and hairless spider,” and whose impossibly long tongue slides out “like a questing serpent” (202). And in Blatty’s *The Exorcist*, possessed Regan descends a staircase: “Gliding spiderlike, rapidly, close behind [her mother], her body arched backward in a bow with her head almost touching her feet . . . her tongue flicking quickly in and out of her mouth while she hissed sibilantly like a serpent” (135). Likewise, the Lovecraftian cosmic terrors in Stephen King’s “N.” have “flattened snakehead[s]” (196) and “snake-eyes” (201; and see Cooke).

## WHY HORROR?

Like most other mammalian infants, human children love to play and explore the limits of their abilities, and it seems that play and exploration behavior is adaptive in that functions as *training* (Spinka, Newberry, and Bekoff). Likewise, seeking out horrible stories may be a way of “pushing the outside of the envelope,” in Tom Wolfe’s term. Pinker notes that pushing the envelope “is a powerful motive. Recreation, and the emotion called ‘exhilaration,’ come from enduring relatively safe events that look and feel like ancestral dangers” (389). And horror stories do seem to be related to thrilling childhood games. As any parent knows, toddlers love games that are just a little bit scary (hide-and-seek, peek-a-boo, etc.), and the typical playground is basically an assortment of low-grade thrill rides where children can test and push their own limits. Conceivably, horror fiction is an emotional jungle gym, the mental version of extreme sports.

Not everybody enjoys horror fiction, however, and a preference for seeking out scary entertainment appears to be greater in adolescence, the period where especially boys are prone to risk-taking “show-off” behavior (cf. Kruger and Nesse). That, at least, would go some way toward explaining social horror rituals like cinema screenings. Moreover, personality differences are likely to play a significant role (Zuckerman).

Everybody likes a well-told story, though, and it is important to remember that horror fiction is just that: stories. A horror story readily accommodates any number of non-horrific subplots and characters, and just as some people like to spice up their *carne* with *chili*, some people like their fictions hot. It would appear that our love of safe thrills is a natural instinct, a way to practice for the exigencies of existence, or a way to broaden and deepen our emotional lives.

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## FILMOGRAPHY

*The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, 1999)

*Final Destination* (James Wong, 2000)

## NOTE

1. In 2003, film scholar Torben Grodal (Udøde ænder) published a paper in Danish, which is a lucid and well-argued application of anthropologist Pascal Boyer's findings to fantastic fiction, including supernatural horror fiction (the paper was worked into chapter 5 in his 2009 volume *Embodied Visions*). Likewise, Hank Davis and Andrea Javor have attempted to back horror-relevant findings from the cognitive study of religion with clever experimental evidence in their pioneering 2004 paper "Religion, Death

and Horror Movies." Timothy Ketelaar, in his 2004 one-page open peer commentary on Atran and Norenzayan's "Religion's evolutionary landscape" speculates that the "ancient problem of predator detection may lie beneath the modern link between religion and horror" (740). And in their 2005 paper "Dracula and Carmilla: Monsters and the Mind," Benson Saler and Charles

Ziegler discuss Stoker's Count Dracula and take on horror stories in general. And further, several scholars have made passing remarks about horror in an evolutionary perspective (e.g., Wilson, *Biophilia* 101). Yet these endeavors, despite their high standards and obvious utility, have made little impact on humanistic horror study.