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Introduction: Psychoanalysis in/and/of the Horror Film

THE MYTH OF META-THEORY

Over the past thirty years, a plethora of publications have argued in favor of a specific psychoanalytic approach to some dimension or convention of cinematic horror. Included among these are articles and books by such influential scholars as Robin Wood, Carol Clover, Stephen Neale, Linda Williams, Barbara Creed, even Noël Carroll in an earlier incarnation. These efforts have typically taken the form of either interpretive analysis (of a particular film, subgenre, or the genre as a whole) or depth-psychological explanation (of the symbolic/mythic import of horror film monsters; of the horror affect and how it is generated; of the possibly perverse pleasures viewers obtain from being frightened by visible fictions). And despite the often vitriolic criticisms of psychoanalysis both inside and outside academic film studies, the horror genre has continued to see a steady stream of *new* psychoanalytic approaches, as well as new variations on existing ones.

As originally conceived, the present volume was to be a collection of "meta-theoretical" essays on psychoanalysis and the horror film – not essays that simply (or not so simply, as the case may be) make use of Freudian, Jungian, Kleinian, Jonesian, or Lacanian principles, theses, arguments, or purported discoveries in an effort at shedding light on aspects of the horror film. Instead, it was envisaged that contributors would take a step back to address the relative strengths and weaknesses of such approaches. This was to be a book *about* psychoanalytic theories of the horror film rather than a book that offered still more psychoanalytic theories of the horror film.

But of course there is no such neutral space outside, much less "above," the fray from which to conduct an investigation of this sort. Those who

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defend a psychoanalytic approach to horror cinema typically have pet applications of their own. Similarly, those who see fit to critique psychoanalytic theories of the horror film almost always have alternative, incompatible (or so it may seem) paradigms in mind.[1]

Especially since the late 1970s, there has been a tremendous diversity of psychoanalytic approaches to the horror film. These approaches differ, and often conflict, in substantial ways. But the objections levied in recent years by analytic philosophers, film aestheticians, sociologists and cultural theorists, cognitive and feminist film theorists, and empirical psychologists, many of whom position themselves well outside the circle of Freud and his followers, constitute a far more serious threat, or challenge, to psychoanalytical horror film theory. This is because such objections would be fatal to psychoanalysis if proven correct.[2]

To refuse to hear such critics out, to assume *a priori* that none of their objections are powerful enough to warrant serious treatment, and to eschew making any effort at responding in turn is more than just irresponsible scholarship. It adds strength to the already potent criticisms that psychoanalytic thought is hermetic and self-confirming, that its film theoretical applications produce "closed, self-justifying systems" (Jancovich 1995: 147). And it weakens the power of those *prima facie* affinities holding between psychoanalytic concepts and explanations, on the one hand, and the manifest content of much horror cinema, on the other. The existence of such affinities is often cited as additional evidence in support of whichever psychoanalytic theory of the horror film brings them to bear in the first place; consider, for example, Marguerite LaCaze's (2002) look at how the relationship between mourning and melancholia – a relationship about which Freud had much to say – is thematized in M. Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense* (1999).

Most psychoanalytic horror film theorists to date have not proven very open to revising their particular accounts as a result of critical engagement with the work of others operating even from *within* the psychoanalytic paradigm. As Malcolm Turvey details in his contribution to this volume, for instance, a survey of the various explanations offered by psychoanalytic film theorists concerning the puzzling pleasures of horror film viewing reveals a host of structurally similar but still more or less conflicting positions. All of these positions depend on the Freudian notion of repressed mental content – anxieties, fears, even fantasies and wishes that get relegated to the unconscious during childhood either because they are too unpleasurable in and of themselves or because they conflict

with more acceptable/appropriate mental content. While the diversity
Turvey refers to might be held up as indicative of the fertility of psycho-
analysis in this area, "from the point of view of critics of psychoanalytical
film theory, there is no genuine disagreement among psychoanalytical
theorists of the horror film – simply pluralism." This is because such the-
orists typically "do not dialectically engage with each others' theories by
(a) showing why candidates for repressed mental content proposed by
other theorists cannot explain the phenomenon they want to explain; or
(b) showing why their candidate does explain the phenomenon better
than others" (*n.* 9).

Clearly, the pluralism Turvey has in mind here is not of the "method-
ologically robust" type advocated by Noël Carroll. According to Carroll,
methodologically robust pluralism only occurs when competing theories
are held up against one another for the purpose of weeding out the weak
ones. Rather, Turvey seems to be thinking of "a situation in which ev-
eryone just rattles around in their own paradigm" (Carroll 1996: 334);
only here, the theorists in question are held to be "just rattling around"
in the *same* paradigm, broadly construed as psychoanalysis.[3] Although
questions have been raised about the presupposed neutrality and exter-
nal stance of the arbiter in Carroll's own problem–solution model of
research,[4] and although it is certainly possible for there to be different
ways – *all* fruitful – of looking at a particular phenomenon, Carroll's
methodological imperative makes sense when it comes to the consider-
ation of theories that appear to be in competition or conflict with one
another.

Arguably, one example of the sort of unproductive pluralism Turvey
is referring to centers on the poststructural psychoanalytic claim that at
the heart of cinematic horror lies a patriarchal fear of female sexuality.
In order to tap into this fear, it is held that the genre defines female sex-
uality "as monstrous, disturbing, and in need of repression" (Jancovich
1992: 10). Such a claim can be considered "poststructural" in that it
ultimately locates meaning not within individual films or the work of
particular writers or directors, but in the signifying codes of horror cin-
ema itself – also because it casts itself in political terms, purporting to
identify and analyze the ideological effects of a specific visual-narrative
structure.[5]

A number of poststructural psychoanalytic horror film theorists, includ-
ing Barbara Creed and Xavier Mendik (1998), employ Julia Kristeva's
(1982) notion of abjection to argue that women in the genre – mothers

especially – are frequently presented as monstrous beings who pose a fatal threat to men. According to Creed,

the horror film attempts to bring about a confrontation with the abject (the corpse, bodily wastes, the monstrous-feminine) in order finally to eject the abject and redraw the boundaries between the human and the non-human. As a form of modern defilement rite, the horror film attempts to separate out the symbolic order from all that threatens its stability, particularly the mother and all that her universe signifies. (1993: 14)

Meanwhile, Stephen Neale and others argue that horror film monsters are typically defined as *male*, with *women* as their primary victims: "In this respect, it could well be maintained that it is women's sexuality, that which renders them desirable – but also threatening – to men, which constitutes the real problem that the [*sic*] horror cinema exists to explore" (1980: 61). If these intuitions were applied to different films within the genre, they would be quite compatible. But unless and until the necessary qualifications are proffered, they stand in evident conflict with one another (as the predominant genders of monster and victim are reversed in each).

Unfortunately, the trend has been for psychoanalytic horror film theorists to downplay the tensions between their respective positions rather than attempt to address them. This has meant that those externally motivated criticisms that *cut across* various psychoanalytic theories of the horror film – as many, if not most of them, do – are typically ignored, their implications unacknowledged, precisely because their very scope encourages a passing of the dialectical buck.[6]

The same cannot be said of psychoanalytic film theory in general, which has certainly seen its fair share of internal controversy. One need only consider the objections of neo-Lacanians such as Joan Copjec (1995) and Slavoj Zizek (2001) to earlier claims concerning apparatus theory and the suture effect; Constance Penley's (1989) critique of screen theory;[7] Linda Williams on the problematic (because ambiguous) "terms of perversion used to describe the normal pleasures of film viewing" (1984/1999: 706); and the heated mid-1980s debate in *Cinema Journal* concerning *Stella Dallas* and the Mulvey–Metz model of female spectatorship. In fact, the feminist-inflected psychoanalytic theories of horror proposed by Williams (1984/1996), Clover (1987; 1992), and Creed (1986; 1993) can all be understood as revisions, rather than outright rejections, of the original Mulveyan paradigm. According to this paradigm, the threat of castration (absence and lack) posed by images of the female form in Hollywood

cinema is contained through a sexualized objectification of that form, whether fetishistic–scopophilic (woman displayed as erotic spectacle, rendered unthreatening by the controlling male look) or sadistic–voyeuristic (woman investigated, demystified, and eventually controlled through punishment) in nature.

As Richard Allen has observed, both Williams and Creed contest aspects of Mulvey's position by identifying "scenarios of female empowerment in the horror film in which the threat of castration [i]s not contained, but acted out in the narrative" (1999: 140). This acting out takes place either through the figure of the "monstrous-feminine" (Creed), or else through the female character's sympathetic "look" at the monster – "a potentially subversive recognition of the power and potency of a nonphallic sexuality" (Williams 1984/1996: 24). Clover, meanwhile, argues for a primarily masochistic and empathetic, rather than sadistic–voyeuristic, identification on the part of both male and female spectators with the originally suffering but ultimately empowered "Final Girl" of the slasher movie. But due to the fact that each of these accounts constitutes a revision/refinement of a highly politicized and psychoanalytically motivated feminist film theory whose implications extend far beyond the boundaries of the horror genre – just recall Mulvey's sweeping claims, e.g., that "unchallenged, mainstream film code[s] the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order" (1975: 835) – they do not really qualify as debates taking place within the domain of psychoanalytic *horror* film theorizing. Rather, they are debates taking place within psychoanalytic film theory in general.

Eschewing the bogus idea of "pure" meta-theoretical inquiry conducted by people with no first-order attachment to their arguments and conclusions, this volume responds to the need for critical dialogue among psychoanalytic horror film scholars and those of other theoretical and disciplinary stripes. It also responds to the need for internal debate among otherwise (at least potentially) sympathetic psychoanalytic theorists of the horror genre. What all of the essays exhibit is something a great deal more practical than meta-theorization, and also a great deal more valuable: namely, *self-conscious theorizing*. It is hoped that the concerted efforts made by each of the contributors to question their methods and motives (past and present), anticipate and respond to objections (actual and possible), and situate their work (historically and across disciplinary lines) will help pave the way for future scholarship on the horror film – of whatever theoretical persuasion – committed to dialogue, progress, and conceptual openness.

In the remainder of this introduction, I will attempt to carve out a space for psychoanalytic theory in horror film studies that is both substantive – more than just an identification of the genre's many direct and indirect references to Freudian (and post-Freudian) ideas – and "epistemically neutral." By this latter term I mean a use of psychoanalytic theory whose validity and usefulness does not depend on the underlying truth or falsity of such theory according to some independent objective standard, scientific or otherwise.

psychoanalytic (horror film) theory at a minimum

Just as it important for us to "be clear about *which* psychoanalysis it is that we are talking about, and so about which claims are and are not being made for psychoanalysis" (Donald 1991: 2) with respect to the horror genre, it behooves us to acknowledge the enormous debt this genre owes to Gothic literature – a debt that has been traced by Judith Halberstam (1995), David Punter (1996), Philip Simpson (2000), Jack Morgan (2002), and others – as well as the past susceptibility of the Gothic to psychoanalytic, especially Freudian, theorizing. William Patrick Day hardly overstates things when he writes that "no discussion of the Gothic can avoid discussing Freud; one of the most obvious ways of thinking about the genre is to read it in terms of Freud's system. . . . We cannot pretend that the striking parallels between Freud's thought and the Gothic fantasy do not exist" (1985:177).

Day seeks to account for the obvious correspondences between Freudian psychoanalysis and Gothic literature at the level of theme (e.g., the drama of selfhood played out within the family; the struggle to contain and control sexual energy; the conflict between masculine and feminine modes of identity) as well as narrative (e.g., the subversion of linear plot structures; the substitution of mechanisms such as transformation, condensation, and projection for clearly defined patterns of cause and effect; the prioritization of subjective experience and the dynamics of "inner life"). He first rejects the orthodox and uncritical psychoanalytic view according to which these correspondences were *inevitable* because the Gothic simply anticipated truths soon to be discovered by Freud. He also rejects the pragmatic and hermeneutic view that these correspondences were *fortuitous* because, regardless of whether Freud was right or wrong, the Gothic simply lent itself to allegorization in psychoanalytic terms.

Instead, Day argues that the two systems – one imaginative-literary, the other intellectual-scientific – have a "common, or at least related, origin":

The Gothic is not a crude anticipation of Freudianism, nor its unacknowledged father. Rather, the two are cousins, responses to the problems of selfhood and identity, sexuality and pleasure, fear and anxiety as they manifest themselves in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Gothic arises out of the immediate needs of the reading public to escape from conventional life and articulate and define the turbulence of their psychic existence. We may see Freud as the intellectual counterpart of this process. . . . The Gothic . . . acclimatized the culture to the types of ideas Freud was to present as truth by presenting them as fiction. (179)

Notice how questions concerning the logical or referential status of orthodox Freudian psychoanalysis are bracketed here. Instead, we get an account that takes the narrative and thematic affinities holding between this theoretical paradigm and traditional Gothic literature to be historically and culturally conditioned, even determined. Such affinities are neither immutable nor traceable, at least in the first instance, to the intentions of individual authors – not those of the Gothic novelists, and certainly not Freud's own. This latter is the case despite the Gothic tone of some of Freud's case histories. Rather, the affinities in question are to be understood primarily in formal and generic terms, the two systems developing, changing, and subdividing in what may well be read as a strange but significant sort of tandem.

A parallel can be drawn here, and perhaps an intellectual debt is owed, to the work of Stanley Cavell. In his 1987 collection of essays, *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare*, and even earlier, in *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell makes a convincing case for the affinities between Shakespearean tragedy and what philosophy (in Descartes) calls "skepticism":

Shakespeare could not be who he is – the burden of the name of the greatest writer in the language, the creature of the greatest ordering of English – unless his writing is engaging the depth of the philosophical preoccupations of his culture. . . . My intuition is that the advent of skepticism as manifested in Descartes's *Meditations* is already in full existence in Shakespeare, from the time of the great tragedies in the first years of the seventeenth century, in the generation preceding that of Descartes. (1987: 2, 3)

Elsewhere, Cavell writes "that tragedy is the working out of a response to skepticism – as I now like to put the matter, that tragedy is an interpretation of what skepticism itself is an interpretation of . . ." (1987: 5–6).[8] If Freud and the Gothic both provided responses (of a sort) to "the

problems of selfhood and identity, sexuality and pleasure, fear and anxiety" as these were manifested in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Shakespearean tragedy and Cartesian skepticism both concern, e.g., "the sense of the individual human being not only as now doubtful in his possessions, as though unconvinced that anything really belongs to him, but doubtful at the same time whether there is a place to which he really belongs" (10).

Whether Freudianism, or any other species of psychoanalytic thought, can successfully shed light on filmic horror's textual processes and the nature and mechanics of its effects on viewers, while presenting itself as one among a number of rival candidates for the job, remains an open question. It is one that depends at least in part on the truth value of the various claims and arguments made in support of psychoanalysis more generally – if not as medical-therapeutic practice, then as theory of human development. (As noted above, precisely *how* such truth or falsity is to be determined is yet another open question.) Many of the essays included herein – e.g., those by Freeland, Schneider, and Prince – make reference to, and in a sense creatively "apply," findings in the broader philosophical and scientific literature to support their arguments, pro, con, and otherwise.

But even if, for the sake of discussion, psychoanalysis at this more general level is somehow proven *false*, its value as a tool for shedding light on specific horror films, cycles, and subgenres – particularly those with identifiable Gothic linkages – can hardly be denied. Many such films and groups of films have been interpreted as thematizing, narrativizing, and embodying ideas and constructs similar to those found in orthodox psychoanalytic theory and its revisions. One example of this is Margaret Tarratt's influential examination of the distinctly, though not always overtly or self-consciously, Freudian manner in which many science-fiction/horror films of the 1950s and 1960s explore "the problem of reconciling the desires of the individual as both sexual animal and social being" (1971: 276). Another, very different, example is Julian Hoxter's look at how, in the Italian *giallo* horror films of Dario Argento, the "complex, shifting connection between individuals and . . . the world of objects which they inhabit" (1998: 99) exemplifies certain key principles of Kleinian object-relations theory.

Carroll (1990: 172–78) seeks to undermine the numerous Freudian-derived explanations of horror film monsters as projections of repressed infantile anxieties. These anxieties are in turn held to be either necessary and inescapable (e.g., Gabbard and Gabbard 1999; Schneider 2000)

or socially and culturally specific (e.g., Wood 1979; Moretti 1983). In addition to such negative emotions as fear and disgust, the return to consciousness of these anxieties in the more or less disguised form of the monster is typically held to produce spectatorial pleasure, whether directly (Carroll 1981; cf. Creed 1993) or indirectly (Urbano 1998; cf. Pinedo 1997), depending on the nature of the repressed material they are taken to incarnate – unacceptable wishes in the former case (enjoyed at the cost of feeling simultaneous horror), primal fears or traumas in the latter case (enjoyed because here worked through or "mastered"). With a few *prima facie* counterexamples in hand, Carroll concludes that psychoanalysis "fails to provide a comprehensive account of the figures of horror" (1990: 174).[9]

Looking at the same glass half-full, however, we might say that psychoanalysis nevertheless *succeeds* in providing insight into many of the figures of horror – not so much into what they metaphorically *mean* as into what they literally *say*, or at least suggest, in terms taken from the languages of Gothic fantasy, childhood nightmare, popular culture, and the cinema itself. Although the issue is by no means settled, it is possible that Freud's theory of anxiety, one which he himself found necessary to revise in 1926, is fatally flawed for one or more of the reasons suggested by various philosophers, psychologists, and neurobiologists (for discussion, see the essays by Freeland, Urbano, and Levine in this volume).[10] If so, then neither the terror nor the pleasure generated by horror film monsters can truly be said to stem from their returning certain repressed fears or desires to consciousness. But this wouldn't mean that such beings still do not represent or stand for something very much like a return of the ideologically or instinctually repressed. The monsters of horror cinema, or at least some of them (if we grant Carroll his counterexamples), may still be plausibly analyzed as embodiments of the *idea* or *belief* that, e.g., "in a society built on monogamy and family there will always be an enormous surplus of sexual energy that will have to be repressed; and that . . . must always strive to return" (Wood 1979: 177), or that "the anxiety of castration and the fantasies woven around the mother's phallus produce horror forms" (Dadoun 1989: 52).

Carroll qualifies his critique of psychoanalytic horror film theory in a manner that would seem to anticipate the epistemically neutral position advocated here: "If psychoanalysis does not afford a comprehensive theory of horror, it remains the case that psychoanalytic imagery often reflexively informs works within the genre which, of course makes

psychoanalysis germane to interpretations of specific instances of the genre" (1990: 168). In a 1997 essay, part of which has been reprinted in this volume, Andrew Tudor makes a similar point, albeit even more cautiously: "Although the genre's self-conscious borrowing from psycho-analysis is not without significance for the theoretical frameworks invoked in its understanding, such an emphasis does not *entail* any specific the-oretical consequences" (446). This last point is most likely true, though just *how* true will of course depend on what one counts as "specific theo-retical consequences." In any case, the role for psychoanalytic theorizing of the horror film I have in mind here is not restricted to the "reflexive in-forming" or "self-conscious borrowing" of pop-Freudian (or pop-Jungian) concepts, images, self-understandings, and explanatory models.[11] The evident kinship between particular horror films and particular psychoan-alytic ideas may be (and often is) the result of a calculated decision on the part of the film's writer or director, but this is by no means a neces-sary condition for bringing to bear the psychoanalytic ideas in question. What really matters is whether these ideas can be shown to be present in the text – *not* whether they were self-consciously appropriated, or even whether they were appropriated at all.

Richard Allen comes closest to articulating the position being argued for here when he admonishes those psychoanalytic film theorists who would equate their purported discoveries with the therapeutic explana-tion of a patient's symptoms:

Symptomatic readings purport to show the meaning behind the text that is concealed by its manifest content, but it is not clear that this is what psy-choanalytic readings of Hollywood cinema achieve. . . . [A]rguably, far from providing an objective code to unlock the real (hidden) meaning of the text, psychoanalytic criticism quite frequently describes what is going on at the surface of it. . . . However, if this is the case, the psychoanalytic critic posing as theorist erroneously claims for himself the insight that rightly belongs to the text itself. (1999: 142)

Allen cites "the innumerable psychoanalytic interpretations of the work of Hitchcock" (142) – a director who made self-conscious, often ironic use of Freudian themes, ideas, and explanations of behavior – as evidence in support of his charge. Nevertheless, he refrains from overvaluing au-thorial intention, stressing the fact that, through close examination of its formal structure, a particular film "itself" can be "understood as a work of symptomatic criticism" (142). My only suggestion would be to give the psychoanalytic critic a little bit more credit, particularly in those