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**Consciousness and the Reality of Monsters in Horror Movies:
Dehumanization and What Monsters in Horror Films Say About Us**

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Abstract

This essay responds to Carroll's *The Nature of Horror* from the perspective of transdisciplinary phenomenological film theory, largely developed by Edgar Morin in the 1950s. It argues that Carroll's reduction of the phenomenological value of horror films to an unreal category minimizes and even dismisses the inherent value of horror films. Morin, Allan Combs, and others offer more integral and transdisciplinary methods for art interpretation and functionality. They help us understand how monsters in horror films can stand as mirrors and reflections of the monstrous in ourselves and society. Thus, the transformational function and value of film is revealed and understood, even when the film is about scary monsters.

Keywords: Art Theory, Consciousness, Capitalism, Feminism, Film, Film Theory, Heroic Journey, Horror, Movies, Myth, Mythology, Ontopoetics, Patriarchy, Phenomenology, Philosophy, Psychology, Shamanic Journey, Transdisciplinarity, Transformation

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Monsters are real, and ghosts are real too.
They live inside us, and sometimes, they win.

~Stephen King

Horror movies depict monsters that most consider unreal. But what if they are real? What if the monsters depicted in art represent actual threats to us in our lives, psyches, and society? What can film as art tell us about consciousness? Works of art reflect “the deep interior of the human psyche” (Combs, 2014). To the extent that art is a representation of the consciousness of the artist and the culture and era within which the artist is situated, we can see that there is something about film as art that is essential in understanding ourselves and our societies. Camile Paglia tells us that civilization itself is defined by art, and that art is a marriage of the imagined and the real (Paglia, 2012, p. xi). Donald Kuspit (2004), says of Henry James and Friedrich Nietzsche, “the extraordinary emotional investment made by both... “is their recognition of “the power of art as the only activity capable of creating values and raising experience from insignificance” (p. 157). It seems that there is something about art, including film, that captures this marriage of the imagined and the real, and in horror in the horrific and the real, and expresses the human experience. The ideal in this transformation is the resolved and integrated state portrayed by the heroic journey that is depicted in myth and story throughout human history (Campbell, 2004). In this journey, the self, the heroic protagonist answers the call to adventure, meets with allies, endures tests, faces their own flaws, goes on a night sea journey, grapples with

the shadow, conquers the dragon, integrates masculine and feminine archetypes, and finally returns with an elixir that can heal the community and the world.

In consciousness and in art, even in mathematics and science with Copernicus decentering Earth from the universe creating a sense of duality in consciousness characterized by Descartes' (1998) cogito, the mental structure of consciousness that Gebser (1985) and Combs (2009) write about expresses the aspect that duality creates -the phenomenon by which opposition arises and gives birth to the potential for synthesis. This Hegelian dialectic (1977) is an essential framework for Campbell's heroic journey in that the protagonist enters into the duality of relationship with the world and the self by undergoing psychological transformation through the meeting and integration of opposites. When we watch horror films, we see the other in ourselves, ourselves in the other and in this exchange lies the potential for psychological transformation.

Film as Art Influences and Reflects Consciousness

Taking the theory that art influences and reflects consciousness as true, we can see the value of film as art in our lives. It helps us understand ourselves and make sense of being and the world. This is why it is confounding that a leading contemporary philosophy and art and film theorist, Noel Carroll (1987) posits disbelief in the reality of monsters depicted in horror movies. His claim that framing horror in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions is useful in understanding the genre, yet he narrows the definition so as to exclude works of art-horror that would be included if he expanded the definition. By saying that works of horror must "not be countenanced by contemporary science" he brushes over the monsters in works of art, such as novels, films, and TV series, that either exist in reality or can be considered to exist (p. 37). We can think of the monster in Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017) as the white supremacist antagonists

who represent a categorical reality in our real world. Racists do exist as operatives of harm in our lives, and not just as depictions in art, because art mirrors reality and reflects our experience of reality and our various states of consciousness. Indeed, art can, as in the expression of horror films like *Get Out* provide a framework and lexicon with which to understand issues in our society and the experience of the other.

To claim, as Carroll does, that a characteristic of horror films is that they portray and represent things that cannot and do not exist in reality is not only erroneous but also a dangerous proposition. Indeed, art is often experienced as our access to truth. That is, we have a largely art-based epistemology to the extent that vast swaths of human beings in the modern world know things about the world through the art mediums of TV and film. Thus, our ways of knowing have been shaped and influenced by film more than we probably realize, and we can learn a lot about ourselves and the world by studying the art that informs our epistemological qualia, frameworks, and processes. This is the sense in which Carroll reduces film interpretation to a singular “monolith of film theory” that “threatens to disembowel the very qualities that grant the medium its power” (Mortimer, 2001). Film theory can best approximate an integral understanding of the value, function, and impact of film such that it resists the flattening of homogenized categorization. We can understand the act of viewing a film as a self-reflective experience in the presence of a work of art that has the capacity to help us see ourselves reflected on the screen, and gain greater understanding of ourselves and the world (Combs, 2014).

Film as Philosophy

There is an inevitable intersection between film and philosophy. Film is an apotheotic art form, combining several other art forms into itself and reifying them into a greater mythos by

which consciousness is transformed via an Ancient Greece-style trance of witnessing story play out in front of our eyes, creating catharsis and transforming consciousness (Aristotle, 1997).

Aristotle speaks as much to the consciousness shifting power of watching an ancient Greek drama unfold as watching a modern film. What we can glean from film informs us about our consciousness. If consciousness is a process by which living beings make living beings *beings* living meaningfully, how can we interpret and understand film as a reflection of our states of consciousness and being? Does film inform us about our states of consciousness? Can we see how it springs as a relief from the backdrop of our collective consciousness and brings to life hidden, repressed, and unintegrated aspects of our individual and collective shadow (Roberston, 1987)? Can film help us discern and experience the collective consciousness as a background, in the Searlian (2004) sense -a sort of Heideggerian (2010) Dasein state that sits in the foundations of our being? Can film reveal to us this background and seat of being in what Gebser calls the “ever present origin”? What art can tell us about consciousness helps us answer these questions and more. While humans once stood staring at the walls of caves, depicting echoes of their existence in drawings, there seemed to be a one-dimensional innocence that Gebser describes as an archaic state in “complete immersion with the Great Mother” (1985). But today, as we stare, transfixed by moving images in horror films, what state of consciousness are we in and how are we to understand ourselves through these images? Are we monsters? Who is the monster? Are monsters real? What do horror films have to teach us about consciousness and humanity? These philosophical questions represent the rich insight that horror films have to offer us about ourselves and our world.

Edgar Morin presented an interdisciplinary approach to film interpretation and theory that made room to include analyses and hermeneutical propositions spanning a wide array of study

from “history, popular criticism, anthropology, mythology, social psychology, audience reception study, art theory, political philosophy” and more (Schoonover, 2006). He couched the experience of film viewing in the realm of the philosophy of aesthetics that highlighted the phenomenological value of film viewing. He helped make film viewing a political activity, a method of social and individual transformation, and a tool for the evolution of consciousness.

The Ergon of Horror Movies: Film as Art Reveals Truth about Monsters

Camile Paglia suggests that “the only road to freedom is self-education in art,” and says that “art unites the spiritual and material realms” (Paglia, 2012, p. xvii). She develops an art-centric theory of pedagogy in which art plays a central role in informing our knowledge of history, culture, and psyche. Her theory evokes Carl Jung’s (1978) concept of the psyche in his description of ways we can understand ourselves and live more meaningful lives through the exploration of the imagery and myths we produce. Art, it seems, summons up images from our individual and collective psyches. Art helps us see ourselves. The artistic image represents our inner experience, which is the subject of Campbell’s elaborate descriptions of the image in mythology. Thus, his several series long documentary with Bill Moyers (1988) on the power of myth in the context of film and the influence it has on consciousness – both in reflecting it and shaping it – is the most successful in film history.

If art is something that unites the spiritual and material realms, then it is not merely an expression of consciousness creating artefacts. Jeremy Johnson cites Gebser as saying that “the apparent succession of our mutations is less a biological evolution than an unfolding of meaning.” If art is not a mere product of the evolution of human beings as artefacts, and is part of an unfolding of meaning, then film is an expression of the background that Searle describes. It is

something that emerges as part of the structure of the cosmos that our psyche is modeled to understand, as Jung says (CW, 1976, p. 561).

Is art a clue to the nature of reality? If so, we can interpret the monsters depicted in horror films as representing something about us. The monsters in these films show us something that harms and dehumanizes. Thus, we can learn about ourselves by studying horror movies, and perhaps an essential ergon of horror movies is to help us wake up to our individual and collective shadow and transform our consciousness so that we stop harming and dehumanizing.

Witnessing the monsters depicted in horror films has the potential to catalyze shifts in consciousness that are characterized by an awareness of the dehumanizing attitudes, systems and actions in ourselves and society, throughout history and today. Horror movies can show us the mechanisms and dynamics by which we act monstrously toward and monsterize others. In recognizing the way that othering and monsterizing occurs, we can wake up to the fact that monsters function as a mirror of our own dehumanizing qualities, traits, and characteristics. And in this waking up, perhaps we find the freedom and will to change. Jonathan Livingstone Smith explains that:

Dehumanized people are experienced as uncanny by their dehumanizers because they violate the human/subhuman boundary. They are conceived as wholly human and as wholly subhuman, but these two representations of the dehumanized person cannot be reconciled with one another. The dehumanizer's mind is pulled in two directions at once, and it cannot settle on either of the two mutually exclusive alternatives. The dehumanizer's consciousness oscillates between them, thereby giving rise to the problem of humanity. (p. 248)

The problem of humanity, then, in the context of monsters in horror movies is that through watching the films we are capable of recognizing ourselves both as monster, monsterized, and monstrous in our dehumanizing acts and states of harmed victimhood. The question is, do film viewers of horror movies realize they are the monsters on the screen? By what mechanisms of consciousness transformation does a film viewer come to recognize themselves in the monsters and choose to change their attitudes and behaviors so that they no longer dehumanize?

Horror films capture an important part of our zeitgeist and reflect how we experience the world and think about ourselves. Seeing the monsters in horror movies as real depictions of actual monsters and monstrous things in the world can help us deepen our understanding of ways we dehumanize, other, and monsterize. This is why Carroll's statement that monsters in films are not real is problematic if we are to learn or take any meaning of the monsters in films. He defines monsters as necessarily "threatening and impure" (pp. 28, 39), and uses this definition to declaim the reality of the monsters depicted in movies. These adjectives could be used to describe the films I cite as examples of horror films in which the monsters can be countenanced by contemporary science and/or are human beings. His definition of monsters and art-horror so narrows the scope of the pantheon of horror films as to render it incomplete, at best, and ultimately, wrong and misleading. In his exegesis on the emotional reaction of audiences and the intent of the creators of horror, one wonders if he has ever spoken to a filmmaker or author of horror stories to find out their intent.

Ways Horror Movies Depict Psychological and Social Realities

Horror movies reveal actual psychological states of consciousness and portray social realities in the real world. We can interpret the monsters and the storylines in horror movies as metaphors

for our lived experience. In John Carpenter's *They Live* (1988), the monsters depicted can only be seen through wearing special glasses. Represented as alien-like techno-autocrats who function on the principle of authoritarian dictatorship, the monsters in the film sponsor messages on TV and billboards such as, "Obey", "Marry and Reproduce", and "Stay Asleep". Carpenter said the film's monster was more like the capitalist autocrats of modern society than aliens, but the production company balked at distributing an anti-capitalist film, so they pushed the "it's aliens" narrative in the trailers and marketing for the horror movie (2015). Nevertheless, the monsters in *They Live* are clearly us and the director's aim in making the film was to get us to realize that and to question the dominant socio-economic paradigm under which we live, oppressed and fighting in alleyways (see the famous scene from the film in which Roddy Piper's character Nada fights Keith David's Frank while yelling, "either put on these glasses or start eating that trash can" as a reference to Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* as he tries to get his friend to put on the glasses, wake up, and see reality).

An example of a work of horror in which the monster can be conceived to exist in reality and society and is thereby "countenanced by contemporary science" (Carroll), is Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2012), in which the monsters are white supremacists who entrap and imprison the black protagonists in the film. Also, consider the alien in Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979), which, one can say is a monster, (though Carroll makes an argument about why aliens are not monsters). While aliens are not found or proven to exist, several astrophysicists and other scientists posit the likelihood of the existence of aliens, including whether they will be malevolent or not (several believe the only way we will know if aliens have come to Earth is if they are malevolent, as benevolent or neutral aliens would not let us know they are here). For instance, astrophysicist Stephen Hawking said, "If aliens ever visit us, I think the outcome would be much as when

Christopher Columbus first landed in America, which didn't turn out very well for the Native Americans" (2015).

Another example of a work of horror in which the monster can be thought of to actually exist, both symbolically and literally, are stories in which ghosts are the monsters. One can understand how ghosts in film can serve as metaphors for the presence of the dead in our consciousness. "Haunted by the ghost of her mother" and "the memory of her husband haunts her" are uses of the image and idea of the ghost. Two recent horror films depict this kind of ghost that we never see, but is haunting the protagonist, and is surely a real psychological state of grief and mourning the deceased formulated into the metaphor of ghostly haunting. Alejandro Amenábar's *The Others* (2001) and David Lowery's *A Ghost Story* (2017) both depict protagonists dealing with the psychological despair of losing a loved one to death. In each story, the monster is an invisible ghost, haunting the protagonist, in a way that can be interpreted as symbolic representation of psychological suffering. The existence of ghosts in horror films, as with other horror films depicting the undead, also serves as a representation of the human need to grapple with our own mortality. The potential to grapple with our fear of death is inherent in films with undead monsters.

Horror films that use the presence of evil and demons often present a juxtaposition of the traditional conception of a monster and a real monster. In Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), for instance, it is not the Devil that is the real monster, but Rosemary's husband and cult who worship Satan and seek to kill (as actual monsters) her baby as a sacrifice to the unreal monster (Satan). The monster in Sam Raimi's *Drag Me to Hell* (2012) curses both the lender and the borrower in the film. The curse dehumanizes their relation to one another and makes them enemies. The monster here is not a demon: it is capitalism and how capitalism deforms human

relations to object/value transactions whereby human beings are treated as means to an end (profit, accumulation, money) instead of ends in themselves.

Further illustrations of monsters that can be conceived to exist in reality by “contemporary science” and that depict psychological and socio-political realities include the monsters in *The Cabin in the Woods* (2012), who are created by human beings, and Mary Shelly’s *Frankenstein* (1994), which is thusly named because the real monster is Dr. Frankenstein and not the creature he creates.

The Symbolism of Monsters in Horror Films Points to Reality:

The Pedagogical Function of Monsters in Horror Movies

Carroll claims to have refuted “the charge that” his “use of the concept of monsters in” his “theory of horror is too narrow”, but I disagree. By saying that *Psycho* (1960) and *The Fly* (1986) are not horror movies (pp. 38-39), he devalues and ignores the symbolism of the human characters in these films who are, essentially, monsters -by reason of their transgressions of what is culturally normal and acceptable, according to Carroll’s own definition (p. 34). At the same time that he denies that the existence of monsters can be known by contemporary science, he denies the importance of the symbolism and metaphor that monsters often represent in horror movies. From the singular vision of Aristotle’s *Poetics* (2013) and the vast footnotery to him in Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949/2004) -and all the psychological interpretations and theories from and influencing them- the idea that characters in stories represent real and actual psychological states and features of human consciousness is unrefuted. Characters in stories are meant to teach us something about ourselves, thus, monsters in horror movies (as characters in stories) have a pedagogical function.

Seemingly contradicting this theorem, Carroll says that “monsters of horror breached the

norms of ontological propriety presumed by the positive human characters in the story” and that “the monster is an extraordinary character in our ordinary world” (p. 16). Both of these descriptions of monsters describe pedophiles and white supremacists. This is a sense in which we can and do call people who violate social norms “monsters.” He further insists that monsters “are unnatural relative to a culture’s conceptual scheme of nature. They do not fit the scheme: they violate it” (p. 34), but he still cannot reconcile his interpretation of monsters in horror movies to the real-world monsters they depict.

He also limits the definition of horror and monsters to that which evokes a sense of threat and impurity, while never mentioning harm as a part of the reaction to horror. Isn’t awareness of the potential for harm key to horror in fiction? The source of harm must not be limited to that which cannot be “countenanced by contemporary science.” There are several horrifying monsters populating horror fiction that contemporary science could explain, whether it is the science of economics that shows how capitalism is dehumanizing (as in films like Sam Raimi’s *Drag Me to Hell* and George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead*), the science that studies racism and the monstrous nature of white supremacy (as in Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* and Nia DaCosta’s *Candyman*), or the social science of literary and art theory that interprets the vampire myth as a symbol for sexual predation, harassment, coercion, assault, and rape and the immortality fetishization tendency of mortality salience (as in films like 1931’s *Dracula* with Bela Lugosi and Paul Schrader’s *Cat People*), and the sciences of social psychology, philosophy, and teratology that study the way human beings create monsters and the way the creation of monsters is a monsterizing, and monstrous, act (as in Kenneth Branagh’s *Mary Shelly’s Frankenstein*, Drew Goddard’s *The Cabin in the Woods*, and Ken Russell’s *Gothic*).

All of the above are examples of movies with monsters that can be conceived of as

“countenanced by contemporary science”, and that evoke a sense of threat and impurity. But by his own definition of monsters in art-horror movies, none of them would qualify as a monster.

Is it possible to conceive of the monsters in horror films as actually existing, even if as states of consciousness, and certainly as real threats that endanger and pose harm in our in the real world, in our real lives? I tend to agree with Stephen King, who wrote in his 2002 introduction to *The Shining*, “Monsters are real, and ghosts are real, too. They live inside us, and sometimes, they win.”

Film as Myth Making, Communicating, and Creating a Sane Society

We would do well to learn about the importance of our creation of and participation in art as vital to our sense of meaning in the expanse of human existence and in our individual lives. We cannot deny the sense in which films, including horror films, reflect our societies, our experiences of being, and our states of consciousness. With films as expressions of onto poetic myth making about our experience of reality, we can learn much about ourselves by studying the films we create. Robert Bellah (2011) describes human capacities in mythical consciousness as capacities for symbol-making when humans live in a conceptual mode of thinking about the world. With symbolic and conceptual forms of representation emerging in human consciousness, myth becomes the greatest way of communicating about the experience of reality and organizing it. In some ways, film can be one of these important ways that we communicate, and it is important because communicating our experience of reality is a necessary condition of sanity (Freud, 1930). To the extent that we can and do communicate through our art and symbol-making, we can approach a more sane way of being (Fromm, 1955). Bellah says that human beings are "narrative creatures" and narrativity is at the heart of our identity. Quoting Claude

Levi-Strauss, he says that we enter "into a kind of immortality" when we participate in narrative storytelling and mythmaking (pp. 33-35). When we stop dreaming and telling stories, we die, according to Aboriginal people of Australia.

Participating in viewing horror films is a part of onto poetics -in which we enter into “the communicative engagement of self with world and world with self” (Mathews, 2009) -and we can find and make meaning and sense of our lives through viewing horror films by the process of understanding that within us that monsterizes and dehumanizes. Film viewing is, in a way, a form of shamanic journeying and dreaming. It has the power to create psychological integration and transform consciousness. When we consider the value of dreaming a world into being by the Aboriginal people of Australia (as depicted in Peter Weir’s 1977 *The Last Wave*) and the Incan descendants of Peru (Villoldo, 2000), if there is a part of this mythmaking and participation in narrative storytelling about ourselves that is lacking in the world today and could be part of helping us heal and transform it. If art is a mirror of consciousness, as Combs suggests (2014), then what does art throughout the ages tell us about ourselves and what do films of today tell us about ourselves and our state of consciousness? He describes the “To observe the inner movement of our own thoughts and feelings we must have a place to stand, a perspective that lends us the necessary objectivity to see our own inner stream of experience” (p. 7). To watch a horror movie is to swim in that stream of experience as characterized and reflected back to us by filmmakers of horror. The horrifying that we see on screen is meant to inform and engage us in an onto poetics of meaning making so that we can understand how we monsterize and what about us is monstrous. Perhaps in this seeing, we can shift the way we are so that we no longer create and act as monsters. The benefit of taking horror films as art more seriously and not writing them

off as mere fiction, the way Carroll seems to do, is that we can shift and transform our consciousness and the world. Without horror films, we might forget that monsters are real.

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