

# Horror

Coms 142 Film as communication

Spring 2022

# Three Questions

- 1. What is horror?
- How is it able to frighten and disgust?
- Why do we seek out horror if it horrifies?

# What is Horror?

- **Noel Carroll** in *The Philosophy of Horror*:
- “...a work should be classified as horror if it attempts to arouse fear and disgust directed at a **monster**.”
- He defines a monster as a threatening creature not thought to exist by current science.
- **Cynthia Freeland** in *The Naked and the Undead*:
- “...horror is involved in exploring various forms of **evil**.”
- Monsters are evil...
- ...but so are gangsters!

# What is Horror?

- It may not be possible to formulate an acceptable definition of horror that will work with our current usage.
- The borders of genres are not neat enough to admit **philosophical classical** definitions.
- However, we can more easily define a particular type of horror story or film with subgenres:
  - Slasher films
  - Zombie films
  - Haunted house films, etc.

# What is Horror?

- So why even try to create definitions of horror?
- Having a definition has allows theorists a way to develop a theory of the appeal of horror ...
- various common plot structures ...
- and to explain why horror is so effective.

# Fear

- How are horror movies able to horrify when we are perfectly aware that what we are watching is fiction?
- The **Paradox of Fiction**:
- How is it that we respond to fictional scenarios with genuine emotions?
- Emotional responses require **belief** in the **reality** of their objects.
- However, knowing that many fictional narratives are merely make-believe has no damping effect on our emotional response.

# Fear

- **Thought Theory:**
- It argues that there is no reason to suppose that emotions we feel in reaction to fictions are any less genuine than other real-life emotions.
- Carroll: “...thought contents we entertain **without believing** them can genuinely move us emotionally.”
- What beliefs must viewers or readers bring to fictions and how are they able to do it?
- We bring to fictions a tremendous amount of beliefs about the world (world views), genres, and the norms of the work’s contemporaries.

# Fear

- There are obvious limits of the thoughts viewers are willing to entertain: and within the range of acceptable fictional situations, there are those that viewers will less readily consider.
- At a minimum, emotional response is both primed and partially constrained by our web of potentially accepted beliefs, however minor they may seem.
- What works best is when acceptable stories are backed by supporting beliefs.



# Fear

- What kind of supporting beliefs are optimal for viewing horror?
- Freud argued for the theory of the **Uncanny** (1953):
- One experiences the *uncanny* when one recalls a repressed or surmounted (overcome) belief that seems to be confirmed.
- Steven Jay Schneider argues that horror villains can be seen as metaphorical examples of repressed beliefs and desires.
- A great deal of horror fiction is cross-culturally portable.
- However, much of the most effective horror fiction produced in the West is ineffective on those raised outside a Judeo-Christian culture.

# Fear

- If an audience is not familiar with a story's religious lore or mythology, it usually has a difficult time emotionally relating to a particular story.
- What is needed for horror to be effective is long-term affective inculcation into the mythology of our culture.
- When one is immersed in a culture's mythology they develop particular beliefs.
- In the West, we can expect children to develop beliefs in vampires, werewolves, ghosts, evil spirits, zombies, and witches.
- Many horror movies involve monsters that have little or no cultural funding, but the monsters are still frightening.

# Fear

- As adults our responses to fiction are often like schoolchildren with many of us harboring beliefs, even if partial, in the supernatural.
- It is not easy to shake off the kinds of beliefs that many of us develop as children.
- Beliefs that things do exist are hard to vanquish, since it is typically impossible to prove that something does not exist.
- What can the plot do to help skeptical viewers?
- Many horror fictions enact a belief-revival process through the presence of a skeptical character.

# The Story's Skeptic(s)

- Not only during the unfolding of the story do the skeptics end up being converted, but they often are the first to die.
- The skeptic in horror fiction serves to “chip away” at the doubting audiences’ certainty for the course of the fiction.

# The Appeal of Horror

- The question of why people seek out experiences of accepted painful art has been presented as the paradox of tragedy, or in our case the paradox of horror.
- A side note: Research has shown that some professions; doctors, nurses, law enforcement, etc. have a lesser predilection to watching horror films than a “general” audience.
- Why do people want to be scared by a movie or feel pity for a character when they avoid situations in real life that arouses the same emotions?
- How is it possible for audiences to feel pleasure at a horror movie or while watching a tragedy?

# The Paradox of Painful Art

- 1. People do not typically seek out situations that arouse painful emotions.
- Masochists?
- 2. People have painful emotions in response to some art.
- 3. People routinely seek out art that they know will arouse painful emotions.

# Eight Answers

- **1. CONTROL THEORISTS:**
  - They argue that the chosen painfulness of some artworks is mitigated by our ability to stop experiencing them at our will.
- **2. COMPENSATION THEORISTS:**
  - They argue that any painful reactions must be compensated for by other pleasures or values, either in the craft of the narrative, or in the awareness that we are sympathetic creatures responding to the suffering of others.

# Eight Answers

- **3. CONVERSION THEORISTS:**
- Argue that the overall experience of painful artworks is not one of pain but of pleasure, as the pain is converted into a larger, more pleasurable experience.
- **4. POWER THEORISTS:** Argue that we enjoy the feeling of power that arises from either the realization of the endurance of humanity, or through the overcoming of our fear.



# Eight Answers

- **5. RICH-EXPERIENCE THEORISTS:**

- Argue that there are many reasons why people do things other than to feel pleasure.
- The overall experience of painful art may be unpleasant, but the experience can still be seen as valuable, and, as such, motivating.

- **6. COMPENSATORY THEORY:**

- Argues that the reason why audiences seek out horror fictions, knowing full well that they will experience fear and disgust, is for the compensatory cognitive (intellect/mental) pleasures.
- Audiences enjoy thinking about how they would go about solving the problems confronting the characters being victimized. The experience of the horror is worth the pleasure of discovery.

# Eight Answers

- **7. Daniel Shaw:**
  - Argues that horror fictions are often enjoyable because they allow audience identify both with a monster (villain) as it dispatches the more annoying, amoral teenagers, and with the victims, who often ultimately are triumphant.
- **8. H. P. Lovecraft:**
  - Argues that people enjoy horror, roughly because it allows them to combat scientific materialism and to engage in feelings in cosmic awe.
  - Horror provides something of a religious experience that helps alleviate the deadening effects of living in a science fiction culture.

# Why Horror?

- The general question will have a limited scope of a definite answer in and of itself.
- More specific questions; why do audience enjoy particular sub-genres of horror can not be easily explained, but will probably come closer than for the general term itself.