

Conditions of Pleasure in Horror Cinema

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Society for Cinema Studies Annual Conference
Pittsburgh, May, 1983

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First, I'll state my assumptions. Reception theory proposes that meaning does not lie in the film to be discovered and appropriated by the viewer, nor does the viewer impose any meaning whatsoever upon the chain of images. Rather the text proposes, the viewer disposes. The viewer "realizes" the text according to his/her own interests, but in order to enjoy the movie, the viewer collaborates with the text in such a way that the spectator's interests and those of the industry coincide. What the film industry sells to the viewer is not a material thing but an experience, or a promise, of pleasure. To study the pleasure economy of cinema is, then, to investigate how the industry produces and patterns texts which yield both enjoyment to the viewer and a return of capital. These are texts which lure the viewer to the movies by promising a dangerous, semi-prohibited vision, but also a vision which is safe, both psychologically and ideologically. By the terms of the viewing contract, desire will be engaged, then domesticated by the textual strategies; fear will be aroused, then controlled. In short the industry offers the viewer not a lawless vision but a well-defensed text. As the psychoanalyst J.B. Pontalis says, "the dream screen should not only be understood as a surface for projection, it is also a surface for protection -- it forms a screen."

What I will call the good movie experience is simply a satisfying session at the movies. It is the experience of pleasure felt when everything in the movie seems to work for the viewer, while the work the viewer performs seems effortless. It is when the movie "moves" the viewer where he/she wants to go, when the movie is understood and

enjoyed in favorable conditions of reception. The good movie experience is the result of a viewing contract scrupulously observed by the producers, the exhibitors and the consumers of the show.

I prefer the mundane adjective "good" to describe the experience in place of a more technical construction because I wish to lean on the sense the terms "good mother", "good dream" have taken in psychoanalysis, implying a sense of satisfaction for a subject who does not merely spectate, but actively participates in the "good" of the experience. An experience in which the subject not only receives the pleasure of the text, but also co-produces it. But the primary reason to use this adjective is that when viewers have experienced pleasure at the movies, when they feel the movie has done what it is supposed to do, they exclaim, simply, "that's a good movie," collapsing all the various satisfactions into this single term.

My question here is: how can horror films provide this good movie experience? Outside the theatre, fear, fright, anxiety are not pleasant experiences. We suffer these emotional states, but we take no pleasure in them. But in the horror cinema we enjoy being terrorized. The "bad" experience has become a "good" one. My question is not why?, but how? More precisely, how are the sounds and images of this genre deployed so that the viewer can gain pleasure in fear? How does the pleasure of horror film differ from that offered by other film genres? And how do I, the viewer, work with the film to gain the pleasure it offers? How do I

allow the movie to move me, to play with my emotions; how do I put myself into its field of play? In horror, how do I gain pleasure from the spectacle of rape, mutilation, enslavement or death? (I'll confine this to the contemporary terror film -- post-Psycho).

Clearly, there are many who find no pleasure in the terror film -- only disgust. Some are unable to defend themselves against the horror of the images; the emotions aroused become too intense for viewers to accept, even though they know that the experience is fictional, that it is "only a movie." Other viewers displace themselves from the fiction by laughter, intentionally misreading the emotional cues of the text, refusing to play by the rules of its game. There is no time, and no need here, to play out once more the theory of the scopophilic drive as a major source of cinema pleasure -- the viewer as voyeur, who watches the supposedly private acts of others from his/her hidden position in darkness? All of this has been argued for the past 15 years by Metz, Heath, Baudry and Mulvey to the extent that we tend to forget that these are sound movies, not purely visual experiences. In horror cinema in particular, the presence of the monster and the emotional "meaning" of that presence (if you will pardon the phrase) is often communicated more through sound than the visuals. Unhappily, this paper too deals strictly with the vision of the horror film, but at least it concerns the limits, not the omnipotence of vision.

So, psychoanalytical theories of visual pleasure (scopophilia) have already been laid out by others (within the domain of cinema studies). But, to my knowledge, what has not been explored is the pleasure in not seeing -- the pleasure in delayed, blocked or partial vision which seems so central to the strategy of horror cinema.

diffuse anxiety in which dread of the return of full vision is comingled with desire for its return to the screen. It is this anticipatory vision -- showing little or nothing of the true object of terror -- which interests me here.

These are scenes which promise the monstrous, but no monster is visible. The viewer senses a terrible presence in the articulation of imagery, but the images themselves display only an absence of the terrible object, or the possibility that it may become visible. Scenes invested with potential; scenes which toy with and frustrate the wish to see. Veiled scenes. Partial, blocked or inadequate vision. Delayed visions. Even apparently empty visions in which one sees clearly, but there is nothing significant to see, no apparent purpose to the image.

The articulation of imagery from film to film is so flexible, so dependent on context, that I hesitate to speak of set visual codes. Better, perhaps to call these images figures -- devices or patterns of figuration -- leaning on arguments advanced by Lyotard. Rather than being a decorative or ornamental "turn" (trope) of the discourse as classical rhetoric would have it, the figure allows a more primary, preconscious or unconscious fantasy to contaminate and rework the ordered surface of the ostensible text. The figure is a kind of overflow from an invisible scene onto the imagery of the film so that what Heidegger or the expressionists might call the stimmung -- the mood or "attunement" of the image -- is bent by fear, desire and anticipation so that it "speaks" something more than it shows. The figure of the delayed, partial or empty vision ambiguates the image; it overlays the explicit significance of the scene with a monstrous presence which "belongs" to an other scene -- a scene off-screen, and not fully conscious.

When I was an undergraduate at Northwestern my girlfriend loved horror films. But during the most terrifying scenes she would put her hands over her eyes, saying "I can't watch," then "tell me what's happening!" This not only irritated me, but puzzled me. "Why?" I would ask her. "You want to go to movies which you know are built towards these scenes of out-and-out terror, yet you refuse to watch them!" Apparently, there came a point at which the movie moved her too much: a point at which she was too open -- too receptive -- to the images. There came a point of stress -- of overload -- at which she had to defend herself against the speech of the film. But not against all of its discourse. She still heard the horror -- the groans of the monster, the screams of the victim, the pulse of the music. She chose to block her vision, not her ears. She wanted to see the movie, but she also wanted not to see when it began to deliver the vision it promised (or threatened).

The contemporary terror film is often accused of visual excess -- of showing too much, too often. It is said to place excessive reliance on what Stephen King has called the "gross-out" -- scenes engineered as sheer stimulus/response, producing shock and revulsion, as when the creature bursts from the chest of its human host in Alien. The full vision of the object of fright may be extended indefinitely in such films as The Texas Chain Saw Massacre or The Exorcist, but in other films the image is only a brief pay-off which proves that the thing is truly terrifying, that the promise of horror can and will be delivered. Typically, the moment of full vision fades once more into a sequence of imagery which anticipates the return of the terrible object but evades it -- refuses to face it openly. The quality of the affect changes as well. Presumably, the viewer's "excess" emotion of fright and disgust yields to a more

But it is time to be more concrete. The range of the imagery is so broad I can offer only an incomplete catalog of figures organized into loose categories:

In the first group of relatively common, straight-forward figures, the viewer knows that the monster is already here, in the scene (in the room), about to attack the victim or actually attacking. However, the look at the monster is denied or frustrated. First instance: he (I say "he" because the monster is usually male) is excluded from the shot by framing. In Alien and The Prophecy the camera holds the victim in an ECU "choker" shot immediately before the attack into its opening stages. We see the reaction but the reverse angle vision of the threat is withheld. If and when the reverse angle is added to the figure, it is an obvious instance of delayed or suspended vision. Another instance of the on-scene threat is the familiar shot, infinitely variable, in which the image of the monster is obscured by mist (The Fog), smoke (Curse of the Demon), or by the shadows of a chiaroscuro lighting pattern.

In the second category, the potential victim approaches a site which the viewer believes to be inhabited by the monster. This figure prolongs the approach, dwells on the simple act of walking or climbing stairs in detail, fragmenting the banal act by a series of shots from a great variety of angles, often fragmenting the body of the victim with ECU's of 'foot on the stair', 'hand on the bannister', combined with ELS's which momentarily reintegrate the body. Intercut into the series are shots of the victims face and, usually, pov shots from the victim's eyes of the empty staircase. No monster is visible, but the scene is overlaid with menace because of the elaborate visual treatment devoted to an ordinary act which would normally be without interest. The classic form of this

figure is probably given in Psycho when Arbogast (the Martin Balsam character) ascends the staircase of the terrible house. (In Hitchcock's scene, the presence of the monster can be inferred from the "gods-eye" shot from high over the stairwell; it is not taken from Norman Bates' pov but upper regions of the house have already been associated with him.)

I think the third figural category is the most intriguing. Here, the viewer knows that the monster is not physically on the scene, may not even be near it, but the position or movement of the camera seems to contradict this knowledge, overlaying the scene with a "sense" of the monstrous. Towards the beginning of the 1983 TV movie The Demon Child, before the demon invades the film, a couple are conversing in their house. Although the sound is recorded as though the viewer were with them in the room, the shot is an extreme long shot of the exterior of the house, the camera gradually tracking from left to right. Instances of these unmotivated camera movements abound in the contemporary terror film, although this refusal to give even a partial vision of an innocent interpersonal scene is rare. In the changing visual codes of the horror film, the prowling or creeping camera has been associated with the vision of a monster preparing to attack. It is interpreted as a pov shot. Here, (and in other films), no monster lurks on the scene, but since the movement has come to "speak" a threatening presence, a monstrous overtone contaminates an ordinary, more or less meaningless scene. Another common instance of the third category occurs when a character is performing an everyday act usually seated, such as reading, talking on the phone, etc. Little of significance is happening or being spoken. Rather than offering a clear or full view of the subject, the camera is placed at an "unnatural" distance behind objects of decor which intrude into the frame in the foreground, creating either a visual barrier or, at the least, a

distraction between the viewer and the person viewed. In this figure the camera sometimes looks from and through an area of darkness into an illuminated scene or, still viewing from a distance, performs unmotivated creeping movements around the static or sedentary subject. Again, the imagery carries a threatening overtone.

The creeping camera, the distant, partial or blocked vision, the frame within the frame. In each of these instances of the third figure the viewer seems to be invited to look less at what is seen than at how it is seen. The means of representation -- the manner or mode of viewing -- is foregrounded, even fetishized. In effect, I believe that each of figures -- (in all three categories) involves the viewer in a structure of fetishism and that a fetishistic structure is more central to the horror genre than to cinema as a whole due to the greater need of horror cinema to defend the viewer against his or her own desire for full vision.

Film theory has made extensive use of the psychoanalytic description of fetishism as a key towards understanding the sexual positioning of the viewer (which is) invited by the visual text. Recently, I have begun to wonder if we haven't made a fetish of fetishism or, at least, if we haven't accorded too much respect to the letter of Freudian and Lacanian law. We may be neglecting some of the more profound implication of Freud's attempt to deal with arrested vision, blocked and diverted desire and the structure of disavowal. If, like Mulvey in Visual Pleasure, we take the fetish as a memorial or monument to male castration anxiety, all kinds of problems are raised. In the classical view, invoked by Mulvey and others, the fetish is formed when the male child perceives that the female lacks a penis. He has a penis; therefore, she has been

castrated. The vision proves that castration is possible. The boy fears that he too will meet the same fate, so he disavows the perception. He cannot totally refute the perception of absence. He "knows very well" that the woman does not have a penis, but cannot abide the knowledge, so he finds or "creates" a substitute for the female genital in order to avoid encountering the vision of absence. The fetishistic look in cinema cannot, according to Mulvey, take pleasure in looking at woman as an erotic object but must, like Von Sternberg transform her into a spectacle satisfying in itself. Dietrich is not to be penetrated, or possessed, but looked at, admired. Once she has been reconstructed into an image, the female no longer threatens the male. To the fetishistic look, Mulvey opposes the "active" look voyeurism, which seeks to penetrate, control, subdue the woman. Both forms of visual pleasure are essentially male, reflecting male control over the means of representation in our society, including the cinema. As Mulvey admits in a later article on Duel in the Sun this theory offers little to explain transexual identification in the viewing experience as when the female viewer identifies with the male position in the film. Is she denying her femininity, or is every viewer more or less bi-sexual when forming identifications during the viewing experience?

Another problem involves taking the penis too literally -- too physically -- as the male sexual organ. Fetishism is capable of being extended outside of its strict sense of a psychotic sexual perversion only if we substitute the term phallus for penis. Phallus is cultural, rather than physical, representing all the symbolic values attached to the penis -- connotations of potency, penetration, invasion, aggression.

A strict view of fetishism would also run aground when confronted with sado-masochistic cinemas of display like hard-core pornography and

(sometimes) the horror film. There is no question that pornography is voyeuristic, that it is a erotically cinema which wishes to control the woman, but it also wishes to look at her at leisure. The pornographic gaze finds pleasure, not horror at her at leisure, to put her on display. Yet Mulvey says the voyeuristic look is opposed to the fetishistic. Secondly, the pornographic gaze finds pleasure, not horror in the spectacle of the castrated, naked vagina. It delights in the absence of the penis, in part because the womans lack affirms the male's potency. He has it, she doesn't -- which recognition justifies the humiliation of the woman.

I believe it is more useful, particularly when dealing with horror cinema, to broaden the sense of fetishism, while still remaining within a psychoanalytic framework. Let us set the question of sexual difference aside, momentarily, and see fetishism as an arrested or blocked vision which has recoiled from, or fears to approach any image of horror -- (not necessarily the horror of the castrated woman). The Freudian notion of fetishism involves a substitution of signifiers: the fetish both re-pre-sents and hides what the subject really wants to see but it is also the symptom of the fear of looking. The fetishistic act is the means by which the subject protects himself/herself against a horrible spectacle, and gains pleasure from a vision which stops short of this spectacle. It is essentially a defensive vision, but one which is enjoyed by the spectator precisely because it lurks on the threshold, because it refuses to fully see. When my friend at Northwestern held her hands over her eyes to prevent full vision of the image of horrible excess upon the screen, she was gaining a pleasure similar to that of the fetishist. (Sometimes she peeked through her fingers to achieve a partial vision in place of a completely blocked one.) In any case she defended herself against the image. But

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through its figures of blocked, partial and delayed vision horror cinema itself defends the viewer from the vision of the monstrous that we know lurks somewhere beyond the substitute images we see before us on the screen. The horror is screened, but more often it is screened off. It is promised, then suspended. Yet innocent, empty scenes are somehow filled with the horror of an other off screen scene that we desire and dread to see. The images of horror movies like those of all cinema are compromised products, defending viewers against their own desires -- and defending the industry as well. To me, the most fascinating thing about everyday cinema is the way in which it refuses the pleasures it promises and yet delivers them through the backdoor. How do we see the unseen? How is the unspeakable spoken? This is what I've tried to begin to explore through those patterns of defensive imagery I call figures.

through its figures of blocked, partial and delayed vision horror cinema itself defends the viewer from the vision of the monstrous that we know lurks somewhere beyond the substitute images we see before us on the screen. The horror is screened, but in the scenes I have mentioned it is also screened off. Nevertheless, horror is screened in the process of screening it off.

In fetishism, one disavows an absence, relocates it in an other scene, and treats it as a presence. Not wanting to see the absence, the fetishist-as-viewer imposes a presence upon a neutral object or scene and invests (cathects) it with the desired, fantasmatic qualities which give the promise of pleasure. Now this is complex and approximate, but what I rightly or wrongly call the figures of horror cinema seem to presume that the viewer wants a full vision of horror and simultaneously does not want to see it screened. This is somewhat different from the strict view of fetishism since, in the case of horror cinema, a long look at the object of terror tends to rob this object (vision) of its traumatic qualities. The viewer "knows" that the more he/she stares, the more the terror will dissipate -- to the extent that the image of full horror will be revealed (un-veiled) as more constructed, more artificial, more a fantasy, more a fiction than the fiction which prepares and exhibits it. To look the horror in the face for very long, robs it of its power.

I suggest that the viewer does not want, or should not want, to doubt the terror of the terrible. So through this figural seepage from another, absent scene, it overlays horror into scenes of apparent

007 ~~horror~~-horror in order to:

- 1) protect the viewer from the excess of the traumatic vision;
- 2) innoculate the viewer to accept the full vision, when, long delayed, it is screened; and
- 3) by delaying or withholding the full vision of horror, and by permitting the horror to bleed through the figures into empty scenes, the film protects itself against the viewer; it obtains a capital gain -- pleasure for the viewer, profit for the industry -- by refusing the viewers scopophilia will yet allowing the drive to almost see -- to almost find its object.

Seeing through not seeing. Vision refused through vision given.

To me, the most fascinating aspect of "everyday" cinema is the way in which it denies the pleasures it promises, while delivering them through the back door. This defensive strategy of pleasure, in which the viewer collaborates, is not confined to horror cinema. But because this a genre which promises excess -- trauma -- the figures of defense are more obvious here. At least, in horror film is where I found them.

May 6, 1983