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HORROR

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It. *Orrore*; Fr. *Horreur*; Deut. *Horror*; Es. *Horror*. Horror is a unique emotion that shares an affective register with fear, disgust, repulsion, and anxiety. Although horror is a common theme within popular culture, locating what is specific to the emotion is difficult. As an object of study, philosophy has come to the genre of horror rather late. Prior to philosophical research, early conceptual work on the aesthetic expression of horror is more likely to be found in psychoanalysis. Thus, Freud's idea of the uncanny (Freud 2003), Otto Rank's study of the *Doppelgänger* (Rank 1989), and Ernest Jones's analysis of nightmares (Jones 1951) have all proved influential in attending to the symbolic significance attached to figures such as phantoms, witches, and automatons. For psychoanalysis, the tropes of horror gain their affective currency not of their own accord, but instead through being situated within the landscape of repressed drives and ambivalent psychosexual wishes (cf. Schneider 2004). Building on the works of Freud and Lacan, Julia Kristeva's notion of "abjection" has gained currency in terms of identifying affective tonality involved in the dissolution of self and other (Kristeva 1982). For Kristeva, the experience of horror involves a confrontation with repressed structures of human existence, especially as they play a biological role in bodily life. Thus, themes of pregnancy, corpses, and sweat, decay, and pus all assume a critical role in Kristeva given they challenge conventional borders delineating the self from the non-self (Kristeva 1982, 3).

ANALYTICAL PHILOSOPHY OF HORROR

In sharp contrast to the idea of horror as a site of unconscious conflicts, early philosophical research on horror approaches the genre as a paradox to be solved. Thus, the principal question guiding this field of inquiry concerns how spectators can take delight in a scene that would ordinarily revolt them in a non-aesthetic context. In fact, the question is not novel. Already in Aristotle (2013), the topic of how an audience can gain pleasure from tragedy is central to his aesthetics. As Aristotle understands it, the value

of tragedy is predicated on its ability to arouse pity and fear in the spectator, and in turn produce a sense of emotional catharsis.

In a more contemporary guise, the question of how a viewer can paradoxically gain pleasure from a spectacle that they would find off-putting in an everyday context has become central in the work of analytical aesthetics. Thus, in his widely read *The Philosophy of Horror*, Noël Carroll (1990) explores how and why the horror genre has proved so popular in contemporary culture. His answer to the so-called paradox of horror is predicated on the conviction that horror viewers are motivated by curiosity of the unknown. As Carroll sees it, the pleasure accompanying horror is thus largely a cognitive one: it involves a process of hypothesis, discovery, evidence, and eventual confirmation.

PHENOMENOLOGY OF HORROR

While Carroll's work has become the definitive work in analytical aesthetics on the horror genre, the appreciation and importance of horror is not only cognitive, it can also illuminate salient aspects of human experience such as identity, intersubjectivity, embodiment, and the nature of existence. In this respect, phenomenology has made a series of enduring contributions to the concept of horror, which presents a challenge to the notion of phenomenology as being anthropocentric (cf. Trigg 2014). Thus, in the early work of Emmanuel Levinas, the concept of horror is deployed to analyse the structure of existence and how it is conceived in both a relational and non-relational sense (Levinas 1985, 2001). As Levinas sees it, the experience of horror comes to the foreground in terms of a contact with the anonymous and elemental "there is" (*il y a*) that underpins perceptual experience (Levinas 2001). For Levinas, this elemental and anonymous existence that is prior to personal experience is not an innocuous structure of human experience, but instead a presence that menaces lived experience and which has certain privileged manifestations. These manifestations include experiences like insomnia, anxiety, darkness, and even the anonymous murmuring of guests in a hotel room (Levinas 1985). Experiences such as these are horrifying because they strip us of our subjectivity and disclose the contingent and indeterminate foundations upon which subjectivity is grounded.

A similar perspective on the relationship between horror and contingency can be found in the philosophies of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2012) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1964). Thus, in Sartre's novel *Nausea*, the feeling of horror is predicated on an awareness of the irreducible mutability of things. The world of nausea does not consist of a series of stable identities and relations, but is instead constantly on the verge of deforming into something strange if not unrecognisable. It is a world in which everyday objects lose their familiarity; faces become a collection of separate parts, the open hand resembles a crab turned on its back; and, famously, trees become dripping and formless structures without any discernible consistency. As with the Levinasian notion of the *il y a*, the affective weight of Sartre's account of nausea is framed by a realisation that the personalised attributes generating a sense of selfhood are ultimately constituted by a series of anonymous structures that threatens to destabilise the integrity of human experience.

Note that this phenomenological model of horror is different from the Heideggerian model of anxiety in several respects. Whereas the Heideggerian idea of anxiety involves a transformation of the subject's relationship to their finitude, horror carries with it no such redemptive narrative (Heidegger 1996). Moreover, as Levinas has it, the Heideggerian concept of anxiety involves a finite subject coming face-to-face with their own death; in horror, we are not even afforded this stability: "In horror," so Levinas writes, "a subject is stripped of his subjectivity, of his power to have private existence. The subject is depersonalized" (Levinas 2001, 54-55).

One area where phenomenological research is especially relevant is in the body horror genre. Body horror is a trope marked by themes of violent transformation and mutation, which contributes to a fragmented sense of personal identity. Thus, in films such as David Cronenberg's *The Fly* and John Carpenter's *The Thing*, the human body becomes the site of a conflict, which involves a lived experience of corporeality becoming independent from the subject. Here, the body ceases to be identified as "one's own," and instead embarks on a life of its own, which can often be at odds with the identity constructed around it. While the horror genre plays these themes out in an amplified and grotesque way, the themes are philosophically ripe and often nuanced. Issues such as bodily ownership, the integrity of identity, and the existential structure of disease and ageing are all at stake in a phenomenological analysis of body horror. Building on these foundations, more recent work on the phenomenology of horror has employed the emotion to study the limits of the phenomenological methodology (Trigg 2013, 2014), the extent to which selfhood and embodiment are separable (Trigg 2019a), and the role the horror genre can play in generating key insights into the temporal, spatial, and affective structure of perceptual experience (Trigg 2011, 2012, 2016). Furthermore, a similar atmosphere of philosophical horror can be found in the films of David Cronenberg and David Lynch, television shows such as *Black Mirror* and *True Detective*, and the novels of Thomas Ligotti and H.P. Lovecraft to name but a few.

CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHICAL HORROR

Much of the current research on horror stems from a renewed interest in the work of H. P. Lovecraft (2008). This interest is especially notable in light of contemporary materialist and realist philosophies, such as speculative realism and object-oriented philosophy (cf. Mackay 2008). What these styles of thought have in common is a conviction that Lovecraft's world presents a challenge to an anthropomorphic vision of the cosmos, in which the world is governed by clear and distinct laws of nature, each of which are readily understandable and accessible by humanity (cf. Harman 2011). Common sense—and, arguably, Western philosophy more broadly—tends to presuppose that human perception and reason generates privileged access to the nature of the world. Lovecraft's vision is horrifying not only because it reveals a strange world beneath the layer of human habit and customs, but also because it contests the ground upon which these presuppositions are founded (cf. Thacker 2011).

Thus, one of the key tropes of Lovecraftian fiction is the figure of the inquisitive human who inadvertently stumbles upon a secret that threatens to destabilise the normative foundations of knowledge and understanding. Moreover, what is discovered here is not simply a "monster" if we understand the term

“monster” as a composite of human and non-human elements symbiotically inhabiting the same body; rather, the discovery is framed by a confrontation with a nameless entity that defies if not resists representation. Viewed in this way, Lovecraftian horror has earned philosophical attention for dismantling epistemic certainties concerning human access to the world and thereby forging a decentralized conceptual landscape, in which subjectivity is no longer the guarantor of knowledge.

As such, much of the contemporary philosophical work on horror is critical if not hostile to phenomenology, insofar as phenomenology is presented as validating an anthropocentric account of the world (cf. Sparrow 2014). In response to these criticisms, phenomenology has exerted a robust defense of its methodological commitments, demonstrating its efficacy in contending with both human and non-human entities, not least the human body, which is often deployed as the object of horror *par excellence*, and which is often overlooked in contemporary debates on horror (cf. Trigg 2014).

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Future directions for philosophical work on horror are plentiful. One dimension of philosophical work that has been so far neglect is the relationship between horror and the burgeoning research on atmospheres (cf. Griffero 2017). Horror looks to be an especially apposite emotion to be studied from an atmospheric perspective, given that the emotion is as much diffused in the environment as it is taken up in the body. In addition, given the intersection between the experience of horror and related psychopathological conditions such as anxiety and body dysmorphia, a close study of horror may shed light on pertinent and related issues such as sense of agency, self-consciousness, and the extent to which the body is knowable. In relation, the concept of horror has the potential to dovetail with notions of queer phenomenology and critical phenomenology, insofar as these methodologies problematize the idea of the body as one’s own (cf. Ahmed 2006; Trigg 2019b). As such, philosophical research on horror is likely to remain of enduring interest; alongside providing substantial entertainment value, the genre also yields important conceptual insights.

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