Horror Theatre:
Investing in the Aesthetics of Horror as a Theatrical Genre

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Historically, horror has been a persistently popular genre across a variety of artistic media. Since at least the 18th century, with the rise of the gothic novel, horror has had a lasting place in literary fiction. In film, horror has been an intensely profitable genre spawning myriad iterations and styles and the stirring up of a good deal of scholarly discourse. Horror has withstood numerous premonitions of its impeding demise, reviving each time with new tricks and tactics for arousing terror. From the early 20th century German Expressionist films like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* to the mainstream box office success of William Friedkin's 1973 film version of *The Exorcist*, horror has consistently been a staple of the film industry. Stephen King, Clive Barker, and other authors of horror fiction continue to fill household bookshelves with grisly and gory stories. As of late, there has also been a nearly endless number of horror-themed television shows, including *Bates Motel* (the latest retelling of the classic horror film *Psycho*), the widely popular *American Horror Story* series, and the zombie-themed *The Walking Dead*.

In the theatre, however, horror as a full-scale genre has remained suspiciously absent. There have been a few short-lived spurts of interest in theatrical horror, namely the early 20th century Parisian theatre of the Grand Guignol and, in the United States, a few very popular early modern monster plays. The theatre is certainly no stranger to gruesome, frightening, and disturbing *moments* of horror. But, by and large, few plays are created that specifically identify as horror theatre.

Ghost stories and other tales of the macabre are as old as storytelling itself. Yet, on stage, ghosts and other monsters are rarely the primary subjects of plays. Ghosts may, as in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* or David Rabe's *Sticks and Bones*, serve as intermediary characters, present to propel the action of the protagonists. However, these ghosts are rarely presented with the intention of frightening spectators and are almost never grotesque or monstrous.

Why is horror so absent from the American stage? How can contemporary theatre makers go about creating a respectable and vibrant horror theatre? What, if anything, is to be gained by doing so? Here, I will be arguing for an artistic investment in the aesthetics of a contemporary horror theatre. To do so, I will examine how horror has been successfully staged in the past and will pull from the vast critical discourse on contemporary horror film to investigate what the theatre may be missing out on by ignoring this popular form; by committing to the ethics and aesthetics of horror the theatre community has an opportunity to widen its audience base, to create new fans of live performance, and to examine the human condition from new and thrilling angles.

What is horror? – The taxonomy of terror

Ostensibly, horror is simple to define. It is a feeling of fear or dread, or a term defining something that inspires feelings of fear or dread. Simply put, horror is a general term for all things scary. We do not, however, use the terms "horrifying" and "scary" interchangeably in common speech. Locking myself into a twisting roller coaster may inspire me with feelings of fear and dread, but it is not an event I would describe as "horrific." Clearly, a more detailed analysis of horror will require a more detailed definition.

When we call something a "horror," we are typically describing the way it makes us feel. Or, at least, the way we believe it is *intended* to make us feel. It is something that is supposed to draw out a sense fear, apprehension, disgust, anxiety, or any combination of these negative emotions. While the level of success or failure for each work of horror may be a matter of personal taste, familiarity with the genre, or innate squeamishness, it is the story's intended effects that are most important to its classification.

Etymologically, the word horror is derived from the same root as "horripilation," the bristling of the hair on the skin most commonly referred to as goosebumps. The Latin word *horrere* means to stand erect, shiver, or bristle with fear. From these origins, it seems clear that horror is a word related to a physiological response. In addition to the emotional component to horror, it contains a strong connection to bodily behavior. An effective horror will make you shiver, cover your eyes, shrink back, stand erect, or jump out of your seat. Horror inspires dramatic, and often involuntary, physical responses.

As it applies to works of art, the term "horror" is distinguishable from the way we utilize the word in everyday colloquial speech. For instance, when one says, "I am horrified at the thought of genocide," this horror is not identical to the feelings aroused when one thinks about zombies or vampires. In perhaps the most influential and comprehensive study of the horror genre, *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart*, philosopher Noël Carroll distinguishes between "natural horror" and what he terms “art-horror.” While natural horrors occur in the real world, apart from any contrived artistic setting, “art-horror” is a particular emotional and physical response evoked by horror fictions. The current discussion will refer to horror as something similar to Carroll’s art-horror. This horror is an emotion produced by works of fiction; it is not the same horror as one feels after, say, hearing about a large-scale natural disaster.

In addition to excising natural horrors from the current discussion, it is necessary to draw a distinction between *moments* of horror and horror as a genre. Moments of horror can and do occur frequently in plays, movies, and novels, even when the work itself falls outside the horror genre. These moments are brief, contained scenes intended to startle, nauseate, terrify, or otherwise disturb viewers and readers. An example might be when Woltz discovers his prized horse’s severed head within his bed sheets in *The Godfather* or when Cornwall digs out Gloucester’s eyes in *King Lear*. These horrific moments may be useful examples for study of horror technique (as well as gripping bits of entertainment), however, in this paper, I will be primarily referring to horror as a term for categorizing entire artworks. I will be considering horror as a label that distinguishes certain novels, plays, and films from other genres, such as comedies, tragedies, westerns and the like.

What then is it that fits something into the horror genre? How do audiences recognize that they are watching a horror film or reading a horror novel? Of course, some works, primarily films, are explicitly advertised as horror and are marketed toward viewers that already identify as horror fans. In the theatre, however, contemporary plays are very rarely advertised and sold as “horror plays.” They are nearly never marketed toward the same horror fans, even though, as Brigid Cherry points out, "fans of horror film are likely to consume it in … other media" (Cherry, 13). What are the common characteristics that horror fans seek out across forms of entertainment?

By reviewing the components of horror as it exists in film, literature, and other art, we can begin to find a definition of horror as is describes the artistic genre. These defining characteristics would presumably also define a horror theatre. Certainly, there are no incontrovertible rules about how to categorize artworks into particular genres. As Mark Jancovich has shown, films like *Silence of the Lambs* can be described by one viewer as drama, but another will call it a horror, and yet another a thriller (Jancovich 2002). Genre definitions are often malleable and even a single film or novel can be marketed under more than one generic label in order to appeal to various audiences or to account for generic ambiguity. In her book, concisely titled *Horror*, Brigid Cherry dedicates significant space to the problems that horror presents to genre theorists. Genre classification becomes increasingly complicated when one considers the multitude of sub-genres of horror, such as slashers, torture porn, comedy-horror, or supernatural horror. Despite the inherent complexities of generic classification, there are a handful of recognizable characteristics of horror that can be outlined here. While this list is in no way definitive, or even universally agreed upon, it will give us a starting place for identifying what horror theatre is, or may be.

Affect - Arousing an Audience

As mentioned earlier, the most influential factor in determining what is and is not horror is the work's internal intentionality. The intention of a horror fiction is to terrify, upset and otherwise *horrify* its viewers. So, how do we know when a work is attempting to horrify us? For some of the more successful horrors, the answer is obvious: we leave the theatre or close the book and feel terrified and disturbed. However, not all audiences respond to fictions in identical manners. Shocking scenes that make one person jump may make another giggle with delight. One may feel faint at the sight of blood while another snorts in disdain of the "fake" gore. We cannot safely assume an *a priori* knowledge that all horror fictions result in terrified behavior. Instead, we need to consider what signals audiences to know that they *should* be terrified, regardless of whether or not they comply.

Noël Carroll proposes that the characters within a horror fiction teach audiences how to respond by depicting the affective responses it is intended to produce. If the human characters in a horror appear terrified, as signified by physical reactions such as cringing, running in fear, or screaming, the audience is signaled to respond in a similar (though not necessarily equal) fashion. Carroll notes that "horror appears to be one of those genres in which the emotive responses of the audience, ideally, run parallel to the emotions of the characters" (Carroll, 17). Here, "parallel to" is not the same as "equal to," as audiences are not expected to see a monster on screen or stage and run screaming from the theatre. They are, however, expected to respond with a sort of sympathetic fear. Carroll finds this response unique to the horror genre. In many other forms of fiction, the audience's emotional response is at odds with those of the character, as in comedy, when we laugh at the pratfalls and shortcomings of characters who are commonly not laughing with us. In tragedy, if Aristotle is to be believed, audiences respond with pity and fear to characters writhing in existential and physical agony. While emotions like pity, fear, and sadness are related to the agony experienced by characters in tragedy, they are hardly close enough to be called parallel responses.

Certainly, Carroll makes a salient observation. In most horror fictions, including horror theatre, audiences know they are watching a horror because the characters express emotions like terror and disgust. However, Carroll places too great an emphasis on the emotional and physical responses of the characters. Sometimes the major threat in a horror fiction, whether it is a demon, a ghost, or a giant bug, lies latent until late in the story while only the audience is aware of its presence. The characters are often oblivious to the threat until it is too late to even run in fear. In other pieces, the characters may respond primarily with resilience and courage in the face of a threat. There must be other characteristics that quickly signal to an audience that they are watching a horror even when there are no screaming victims in the story.

Monsters and the Monstrous

Though the existence of monsters and monstrous entities is not the only defining element of horror, they are undeniably a very prominent feature of horror tales. While Carroll's analysis of horror is one of the most broadly influential, he defines horror in very narrowly limited terms. He contends that horror fictions must contain a central monster and that this monster must be a being, “not now believed to exist according to reigning scientific notions” (Carroll, 35). In order to arouse feelings of art-horror, the monster must be both threatening and impure; the monster’s threatening aspect leads audiences to experience fear, while their impurities elicit disgust.

In Carroll’s assessment, horror monsters are deemed impure because they are “categorically interstitial” (Carroll, 32). Most horror monsters violate categorical restrictions that we, as logical and empirically minded adults, deem impossible. The monsters’ most frequent transgressions are between the boundaries of life and death. Zombies are technically dead, but appear to be alive. Ghosts inhabit the world of the dead yet hang mercilessly on to their habitation with the living. Frankenstein’s monster is categorically interstitial; Mary Shelley’s Creature is neither fully human nor fully non-human. Some monsters cross the boundaries between human and animal (like the werewolf) or human and insect (like Brundle in *The Fly*). Whatever their physical forms, monsters must be “not only lethal but—and this is of utmost significance—also disgusting” (Carroll, 22).

For Carroll, the monster is key. According to his definition, several stories that are popularly labeled as horror do not meet the most important prerequisite. “Tales of terror” such as Tyron’s *The Other* or Poe’s *Telltale Heart*, several slasher films, such as the first installment of *Friday the 13th* wherein the killer is Jason’s disturbed but very human mother, and gore films such as the *Saw* series do not feature a supernatural monster and are therefore not horror stories. For Carroll, even the theatrical tradition of Grand Guignol falls outside the horror genre for “though gruesome, *Grand Guignol* requires sadists rather than monsters" (Carroll, 15). Because of these limitations on the necessity of the supernatural monster, Carroll's definition of horror has often been criticized as too narrow, or, as Cherry writes, "overly limiting" (Cherry, 161).

In order to expand on Carroll's notion to include monsters of the non-supernatural variety, perhaps we can amend the requirement to stories that feature monsters or monstrous figures, including humans with nearly inhuman capacities for evil. In recent years particularly, many horror films and novels have relied on monstrous killers, from the entire *Psycho* series to the many iterations of Hannibal Lecter. To allow for the broadest types and classes of horror to live on the stage, it may be necessary to be inclusive and generous with our definitions, giving theatre artists more options for creating horror on stage.

Bodies, Gore and Tactile Responses – Spectacle

As determined by its etymology, physical reactions are of primary importance to horror, and realistically rendered scenes of bodily disfigurement often generate the most violent physical responses. It is often the vision of blood or bodily violence that make audiences most uncomfortable and its disturbing effects can last much longer than the quick jolt of a shocking scare. Blood and gore are so effective because audiences can easily identify with them. Anyone who has suffered so much as a paper cut can imagine the exponentially amplified pain that must occur when, say, a character has his arm cut off. Blood, when it is outside the body, is a sign of physical suffering to which nearly all of us can relate. Scenes in which skin is sliced, bones are broken, or fingernails are pulled from their beds are the most likely to make viewers or readers cringe and writhe in sympathetic pain. As Cherry notes, scenes of bodily mutilation can create a "potentially painful tactile experience for the viewer." In film, these scenes rely on special effects to "expose the internal organs and the mechanisms of the flesh…The more realistic these recreations are, the more likely is the viewer to experience them viscerally" (Cherry, 82).

Scenes of bodies in pain are a quick way to trigger horrified feelings in audiences. We like to believe that our bodies are inviolable, that our skin is an unbreakable barrier that separates us from "not-us". When blood is leaked in horrors, it serves as a reminder that our bodies are not, in fact, indestructible and that our most vital fluid, our blood, runs mere millimeters from the world outside us. In a brief, but fairly comprehensive article addressing the use of bodily pain in horror, Jesse Stommel writes:

> Horror films, and especially the slasher sub-genre, deconstruct the perceived integrity of the human body…We're drawn to and fascinated by horror because the genre reminds us, more than any other, that we have both outsides and insides, skin and guts, eyes and gray matter, ideas and appetites. There are bodies being torn apart onscreen, but the wondrous power of horror is its ability to remind us that there are also bodies in the audience, bodies in our living rooms, bodies seeing, bodies hearing, bodies breathing, bodies screaming.

Horror points to the universal vulnerability of our bodies and reminds us of the fragility of our existence.

In an effective horror, graphic scenes of violence are not simply gratuitous. These scenes should both extend from and help further the plot. In her book *The Naked and the Undead: Evil and the Appeal of Horror*, feminist scholar Cynthia A. Freeland relates these scenes to “numbers,” as in the heightened-spectacle, song-and-dance moments in a musical. Numbers are central to a well-planned horror; they are “what the audience goes to the films for and expects, what delivers the thrills they want to experience” (Freeland, 256). In Freeland’s description, numbers serve three primary functions: to further plot, to enhance emotional effects, and to appeal to the aesthetic tastes of horror fans. Freeland warns that while numbers are central to horror, they should also be used sparingly to enhance an audience’s desire to know more (a warning, she notes, that is often unheeded by sequels of successful horror films.) In many instances, numbers are the moments when knives or claws slice through skin, when bones crunch, and blood spills. They can also, however, refer to the moment a ghastly, disgusting monster is finally revealed.

A working definition of horror

To qualify as a horror, a story, film or play must feature the three major elements listed above. It should be created with the intention of eliciting feelings of art-horror in its audiences as its primary function, including feelings of fear, dread, startledness, and disgust. Evoking these feelings should be the work’s primary intention, not the product of an isolated horrific moment. It should feature a central monstrous figure around whom the plot unfolds. While this may not necessarily be a literal, supernatural monster, it must be a character whose actions and aura are monstrous, that is, a threatening, transgressive presence. Lastly, it should feature threats to the physical safety of its characters, which may be presented through scenes of bodily violence.

While applying these conventions to film and literature may result in an unwieldy set of “horror” works, it seems that even this admittedly broad definition eliminates most major American plays from the genre. While many plays may feature a monster, whether in abstracted forms like *Macbeth*’s weird sisters or in human form like the monstrously evil Iago, the American theatre rarely meets the second qualifying requirement. Plays may intend to momentarily shock their audiences, but they rarely want the feeling to linger.

“Where are all the scary plays?”: A Brief Look at the History of Horror in Theatre

At first glance, it may be easy to believe that horror is impossible in contemporary theatre, as film and its special effects have made audiences more acutely aware of the artifice of the stage. In the theatre, we are constantly questioning and poking holes in the techniques used to create horrific events. The feeling is that audiences take a perverse pleasure in identifying moments as looking “fake.” However, this does not explain why so many theatre pieces rely on extreme moments of horror, and that these moments are often the most memorable and talked about moments of the plays. So, theatre’s perceived aversion to horror must be something more complex than the mere unwillingness of audiences to suspend their disbelief in stage effects.

In 2014, Andy Nyman wrote a short article for *The Guardian* entitled, “Theatre can outdo cinema for horror – so where are all the scary plays?” In this piece, he argues that a horror play, as exemplified by the West End’s *The Woman in Black* can “carr[y] a wallop that is acutely amplified because it is live.” Disheartened by the existence of only a single horror play on London’s major stages, Nyman and his collaborator Jeremy Dyson wrote *Ghost Stories*, a play whose website warns that those of “nervous disposition” should “think very seriously before attending.” If Nyman was disconcerted with the variety of horror stories available on the West End, he would certainly be appalled at the dearth of horror theatre on the American stage.

My own interest in horror theatre began several years ago after viewing a production of Martyna Majok’s play *Mouse in a Jar* at Denver’s LIDA Project theater in 2010. While the production, a dark “subterranean” exploration of the terrors of Stockholm syndrome, was not specifically a horror play, it was extremely unnerving. On returning to my apartment, I nearly jumped out of my skin when my living room light bulb unexpectedly burst. I remember incredulously thinking, “A *play* put me this on edge?” As a lifelong fan of horror films, this revelation left me with a thirst for finding horror on stage. In order to propel future creations of horror theatre, I will look at a few salient aspects of horror plays and instances in which they have been successfully rendered.

Le Théâtre du Grand-Guignol

Despite its ostensible paucity, there is a rich but often overlooked history of horror in theatre and performance. In fact, some of the theatre’s earliest recorded plays were said to contain some truly terrifying moments. It has been rumored that during the first performance of Aeschylus’ *Eumenides*, “the chorus of Furies was so frightening in appearance that several women in the audience miscarried” (Brockett, 32).

The most notable instance of stage horror was found in the theatre of the Grand Guignol, which experienced its bloody and gore-spattered hay day in the 1920s and '30s. This theatre was known for its pursuit of exceptionally realistic and extreme scenes of gore, its explicitly violent plots, and its expert use of special effects.

In 1894, Oscar Méténier founded *Le Théâtre du Grand-Guignol* in Paris to produce many of his own "*rosse*" plays. These short pieces were written in the vernacular of, and featured characters from, Paris' lowest classes, including prostitutes and drug dealers. Formerly a chapel complete with carved cherubs and creaky pews, Méténier's theatre exuded an eerie gothic aura. After four seasons featuring *rosse* plays, Méténier turned the theatre over to Max Maury, who created the bloody style that became the signature of the Grand Guignol. The company's playwright. Andre de Lorde, known as the "Prince of Terror," wrote over one hundred horror plays for the Grand Guignol between 1901 and 1926 (Gordon, 21).

Under Maury and de Lorde's collaboration, *Le Théâtre du Grand-Guignol* became a leading attraction for Parisians and tourists alike, prompting de Lorde to state, "men who flee fear through the day, flock to it after sundown at the Grand Guignol" (Gordon, 22). The theatre enjoyed its greatest popularity in the period between World War I and World War II. After Maury's retirement, under the direction of Camille Choisy, the Grand Guignol became a well-loved attraction for members of all classes of Parisian society, from the lower classes who were the focus of the *rosse* plays to royalty and millionaires in formal dress. Choisy's insistence on new and elaborate slight-of-hand tricks and ornate sets gave “Guignolers” a new and exciting experience with each visit.

Popularity began to wane under the direction of Jack Jouvin, who shifted the theatre’s focus from gore to psychological crime and suspense dramas. After WWII, as the real-life horrors of the holocaust began to emerge, attendance began to dwindle significantly. In 1959, The Grand Guignol’s then-director Charles Nonon stated “Before the war, everyone felt that what was happening on stage was impossible. Now we know that these things, and worse, are possible in reality (Gordon, 33). The theatre officially closed in 1962.

In honor of the theatre that made it famous, the term “Grand Guignol” has come to refer to a particular style of horror. In Grand Guignol tradition, a good horror play was said to be measured by the number of patrons who fainted each evening (the record was fifteen) and it was not uncommon to see doctors on site treating viewers who vomited or swooned (Gordon, 28). Grand Guignol plays were short, ten- to fifteen-minute pieces, filled with suspense and leading to a dramatic bloody climax. A typical evening alternated three horror plays with three comedies (known as “hot and cold showers”). The plays were most known for their spectacular scenes of blood and ever-evolving special effects. Grand Guignol scripts were dominated by themes of cognitive instability, with characters in throes of insanity or controlled by a deranged hypnosis. They often featured scenes of rape and torture. De Lorde’s *The Laboratory of Hallucinations*, for example, features a deranged and cuckolded surgeon who tortures his patients and is in turn tortured by his wife’s lover who “cracks open his skull with scissors." The Grand Guignol dedicated such time and expertise to its special effects, that it was deemed necessary to largely keep their techniques a secret. They even had patented recipes for various forms of stage blood. Some of the company's horrifying effects included snipping off a woman's nipples, acid melting and bubbling the skin of a victim's face, eyes gouged out with knitting needles, and all manner of severed limbs.

Like a true horror monster the Grand Guignol tradition occasionally finds itself resurrected to unleash its horrors on new audiences. Currently, there are a small handful of theatre companies creating work in the Grand Guignol style. Molotov Theatre Group in Washington D.C. is dedicated to creating theatre that "applies the Grand Guignol ideals to contemporary and classic works, and produces English translations of original Grand Guignol scripts." Their website includes "The Molotov Manifesto," which lists techniques utilized by the company to achieve its predecessor's form and style. In 2014, New York City's The Flea Theatre produced a series of plays titled *The Cutthroat Series: Grand Guignol Duels*. In San Francisco, Thrillpeddlers have performed "authentic Grand Guignol horror plays, outrageous Theatre of the Ridiculous musicals, and spine-tingling lights-out spookshows" for nearly the past twenty years. Although largely confined to the annals of horror, Grand Guignol maintains a spattering of sparse but devoted followers.

The Effects and Technology of the Grand Guignol

Over the years, Grand Guignol directors and prop masters became more and more adept at creating devices to achieve realistic blood effects to startle and nauseate its audiences. Stage blood was something of an obsession in the Grand Guignol, so much so that several types of blood may be utilized in a single performance to indicate fresh wounds or old scabs. The traditional blood recipe for the Grand Guignol was a mixture made of carmine and glycerine. When heated, the mixture would flow freely, but would begin to coagulate as the mixture cooled (Gordon, 45).

Most of the Grand Guignol's effects relied on a combination of modified props and an actor's sleight of hand; actors trained in sleight of hand techniques as if they were stage magicians. Russell Blackwood describes one of the more elaborate tricks:

> One method even produces an eyeball skewered on the end of a jack-knife. The retractable blade of the knife moves into the handle which squirts blood when pressed against the victim's face. Affixed to the end of the handle is a piece of adhesive "skin" (latex or lamb skin) with a slit to allow the blade to move through it. As the handle is pressed against the victim's eye the sticky "skin" is pressed to the eyelid leaving a gory empty eye socket. When the knife handle is pulled away the blade is released back into position. The actor with the knife squeezes an air pump in the handle and a rubber eyeball on the end of the knife inflates. The eye appears to be impaled on the tip of the knife. Many magic shops sell an inflatable ball and pump mechanism that could work as a base for this prop (Blackwood, 1996).

Another eye-removal trick was accomplished by creating a half-mask of latex that the actor would partially conceal with her hair. The mask would be fitted with a sheep's eye, lactose powder, and a blood capsule. The eye could then be removed with a prop knife, a knitting needle, or even with bare hands. Hand amputations were "easy" to achieve by stiffening a glove with glue water to retain the shape of hand after an actor pulls his arm into his coat sleeve. To further amplify the stage techniques, set designers would often partially darken the stage décor to produce an unconscious feeling in the audience that something (or someone) was always lurking in the shadows.

Gore continues to be an effective go-to for inducing horrified feelings in theatre audiences. It was reported that during the Globe Theatre's 2006 (and 2014 revival) production of *Titus Andronicus,* "more than 100 people either fainted or left the theatre after being overcome by on-stage gore" (Clark, 2014). Echoing the sentiments of the Grand Guignol, *Titus'* director Lucy Bailey stated, "I used to get disappointed if only three people passed out." Audiences were most viscerally affected by the entrance of Lavinia after she has been raped and mutilated, her hands severed and her tongue ripped out. Of course, *Titus Andronicus* is Shakespeare's most bloody and perhaps most savage play, in which one bloody act of revenge continually begets another. If the characters were less revenge-crazed and more clearly monstrous, *Titus* may even qualify as a horror. However, its plot does not quite fit the mold.

The Woman in Black

Perhaps the most popular currently running horror play is the West End's *The Woman in Black*. Unlike the Grand Guignol, *The Woman in Black* uses very few special effects to create its uncanny atmosphere, instead, the show works to build feelings of dread through heightened moments of suspense.

Adapted by Stephen Mallatratt from the novel of the same name (written by Susan Hill), *The Woman in Black* has been playing at London's Fortune theatre since 1989, making it the second longest running non-musical in the West End's history. With the Fortune's 432 seats at capacity nearly every night and a backing of effusive reviews, the popularity of this haunting ghost play is undeniable.

The story is structured as a play-within-a-play, a framing device which exists solely to allow the entire piece to be performed by two actors (plus the eponymous "woman in black"). One actor plays Mr. Arthur Kipps, a young lawyer sent to settle the estate of a recently departed elderly woman. The woman's estate sits on an isolated marshland, inaccessible except at times of low tide and known to locals to be haunted by a young woman in a black veil. Although he "does not believe in ghosts," Kipps finds himself driven to a frenzied terror after a series of encounters with the specter. The second actor plays the surrounding roles, a carriage driver, a local townsperson, Kipp's employer, etc.

Mallatratt's script emphasizes that while the play contains no scenes of blood or gore, the horror should be created through an extended sense of suspense. The scenic requirements are incredibly sparse, simply an empty stage with a "clutter of clothes, boxes and furniture." Rather than elaborate scenic elements, sound and light cues are heavily utilized to highlight or obfuscate the action. As Chris Wiegand wrote in his 2009 review for The Guardian, "the best horror stories require the simplest of ingredients…all it took was a torch, the shadow of a creepy hand on the wall, and a few rudimentary sound effects to draw me in."

The Woman in Black's techniques are simplistic, but well-planned. In an interview for *The Guardian* Robin Herford, director of *The Woman In Black*, describes the importance of engulfing the audience in a sense of unease:

> "The whole theatre is the set," explains Herford. "If I'm watching something scary on the telly or at the cinema, you know it's just an image on a flat screen, and you can shut your eyes." From the beginning of the show, however, characters start appearing at the back of the auditorium, leaving the audience constantly feeling something could creep up on them. "I try to preserve a sense of discomfort," adds Herford. "There's no music playing, and I try to keep the air conditioning cooler than might be comfortable. The audience is slightly keyed-up" (Needham, 2012).

In an "Adapter's Note" preceding the text of the script, Mallatratt acknowledges the difficulties of staging a horror play and provides some advice on overcoming them:

> Directors are unlikely to have much experience of ghost plays as there are relatively few around, so at the risk of stating the obvious think it's worth a word or two considering staging. I've now seen many productions of *The Woman in Black* around the world, some very effective, others less so.
>
> The intent of the show is to frighten – so if it doesn't, it's nothing. The fear is not on a visual or visceral level, but an imaginative one. There are no gouts of blood nor any but the simplest of special effects.
>
> Darkness is a powerful ally of terror, something glimpsed in a corner is far more frightening than if it's fully observed. Sets work best when they accommodate this – when things unknown might be in places unseen.
>
> I have seen a production where the Woman herself was in full light for all her manifestations, and centre stage. Few things could have been less frightening. In the current London production we deny a satisfying look at her until her final moment, and only then does she appear in all her terrifying despair.
>
> The only aspect of the play that has any claim to complexity is the sound plot. There's also scope, though no obligation, for a wealth of light cues. In general, simple, straightforward staging is the most effective. For example there are one or two moments when just by raising the volume of a sound cue to an unexpected level, the audience can be shocked to a screaming pitch.

Mallatratt's note highlights two important aspects of horror theatre. One, horror plays (in this case, ghost plays in particular) are hard to come by. Because they are so rarely produced, most theatre makers will come to them with little experience. While theatre creators often seek out innovation and novelty in the content of their plays, their techniques are frequently reliant on familiar, well-established conventions. However, Mallatratt's note also shows that the techniques required to accomplish horror theatre can ultimately be quite simple. While the thought of staging a horror play may cause some directors and designers more dread than the phantoms they feature, their fears can be easily overcome by focusing their energies on highlighting the plot's moments of suspense.

Haunted Stages

Ghosts are not uncommon characters in theatre. On American stages, *Angels in America*, *Three Tall Women*, *Bengal Tiger at the Bagdad Zoo*, *Death of Salesman* and countless other plays resurrect the dead and recount their tales through the mouths of ghosts. Looking at the whole of theatre history, the list grows exponentially, from the ghost of King Darius in Aeschylus' *The Persians* to the numerous, now familiar, ghosts that haunt the stories of Shakespeare.

The theatre has a special relationship with ghosts. From the ubiquitous tales of specters that are said to haunt old playhouses, to the very terminology used by theatre practitioners - the light left partially illuminating the stage when the theatre is not in use, for instance, is referred to as a "ghost light." Despite their intimate relationship with the stage, ghosts are often overlooked in critical discussions of the theatre. In the introduction to their book, *Theatre and Ghosts: Materiality, Performance and Modernity*, Mary Luckhurst and Emilie Morin lament the lack of critical writing surrounding the spectral and the theatre:

> Yet analysts of the theatre have paid relatively little attention to the burgeoning discipline of Spectrality Studies and the insights that it yields into wider socio-political agendas. This is doubly curious given the theatre's immediacy, liveness, materiality and potential for political intervention, and the fact that theatre performance and production are inherently to do with the ephemeral and evanescent (Luckhurst and Morin, 3).

The theatre is necessarily an ephemeral realm, as each production wisps into and out of existence each night. It is no wonder it is filled with ghosts. As Marvin Carlson has written, "It seems peculiarly appropriate that both *Hamlet* and *A Christmas Carol*, the two most frequently-produced theatre pieces in the English-speaking theatre, are ghost stories." (Carlson, 27) Some of these ghosts exist to provide warning or advice to the play's protagonists, like the Ghost of Marley in *A Christmas Carol,* some are used to explore the past and its uneasy relationship to the future, as the ghost of Emily in *Our Town*, some are vehicles for social commentary, as in Caryl Churchill's *Fen*. Occasionally (though only occasionally), they are even meant to horrify.

While contemporary stage ghosts are often intended to evoke sympathy or awe rather than to terrify or frighten, there do exist instances where the presence of a ghost on stage is intended for horrific effect. In the late 19th century, English dramatist James Boaden created an adaptation of Ann Radcliff's gothic novel *Fountainville Forest*. His production culminated in the surprising and terrifying revelation of a ghost. However, Boaden found the task of staging a specter that would induce terror more daunting then he first anticipated. Writing of himself in the third person, he stressed, “How far the author might be able to get such an effect attempted on the stage was a matter of much anxiety” (Wolfram, 55).

Unlike literature, stage adaptations of ghost stories face a certain limitation. The character of the ghost must somehow be physically portrayed. Usually, this means the existence of a living, undeniably *embodied,* actor. The presence of a ghost can of course be merely suggested, but if the play is to distinguish itself as indeed a ghost story, it may be necessary for the ghost to be presented to the audience. However, giving the ghost a physical form may not only undermine its existence as a non-physical being, it can also abate the sense of terror it is intended to produce. Natalie Wolfram refers to the question of whether to suggest the presence of a ghost on stage or embody a ghost within an actor as “the ghost problem” (Wolfram, 49). The presence of a ghost is a problem as the physical presence of an actor on stage can be sufficient to lure an audience out of their willingness to believe in the existence of a necessarily *disembodied* ghost.

Dramatists have attempted to address the ghost problem in a number of ways. In the early 19th century, it was common practice that ghosts entered the stage by rising through trap doors as if they were rising from the depths of hell. To add to the effect, these entrances would typically be accompanied by horrific fanfare such as loud noises, smoke, and even flames (Carlson, 35). Entrances of this kind were often applied to well-known ghosts like the ghost of Hamlet’s father, and were a commonly utilized method for signaling to the audience that they should indeed be terrified. When facing the task of presenting the unpresentable, an actor in a bodiless role, it was often done with the least subtlety possible, to preemptively ward off any confusion for the audience.

For some, including James Boaden, the solution to the ghost problem could be found “not by presenting an illusion so convincing as to deceive the audience into believing the ghost was ‘real’; rather, [by seeking] to contrive an *effect* of realness that would so excite audience’s sensations as to transcend the rational and access the more closely guarded sites of feeling” (Wolfram, 56). Boaden found that the simplest solution for creating an uncanny effect in his play and arousing the audience’s “closely guarded” feelings was to hire a tall, gaunt actor to pantomime the ghost while, offstage, another actor with a deep, sonorous voice spoke the ghost’s single line. Audiences were taken aback by the unexpected discord between what they saw and what they heard, creating a brief sense of shock and bewilderment.

Another solution to the ghost problem has been to avoid embodying the ghost altogether by utilizing projections and other technologies. During the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Phantasmagoria shows were widely popular in New York and London. These productions utilized a host of technological marvels to horrify and surprise their audiences. One leader in the creation of the Phantasmagoria spectacles, Étienne-Gaspard Robertson, designed productions featuring skeletons, ghosts, and any number of characters of the macabre, often projected onto billows of smoke. “I am only satisfied,” he mused, “if my spectators, shivering and shuddering, raise their hands or cover their eyes out of fear of ghosts and devils dashing towards them” (Carlson, 36). Most of the projection technologies utilized for these early shows, however, were immensely cumbersome and the difficulties of mixing live actors and projected images proved tricky. As such, they were largely ignored by the mainstream theatres who continued to utilize trap door techniques to deliver their ghosts.

In 1862 Henry Dircks developed an innovation in projection technology, which he presented to the British Association for the Advancement of Science with the express intent that his device should be used to create more convincing ghosts in the theatre. The device projected images onto panes of glass rather than smoke creating a more convincing ghostly image. Dirck's invention was still too bulky and difficult for use in major playhouses however, until scientist and showman Professor John Henry Pepper discovered the device and modified its format to make it more amendable to a variety of theatrical spaces. The device, which came to be known as "Pepper's Ghost," involved a large pane of glass tilted at 45 degrees toward the audience projecting an actor in the wings. Carlson writes, "For the first time the theatre could present a convincing three-dimensional spectre that could appear suddenly anywhere on stage without the use of a trap, apparently walk through walls, solid objects and even other actors" (Carlson, 39).

For the next decade, Pepper's device was a fashionable success, gaining popularity throughout the English theatre. It was utilized in productions of plays like Charles Dicken's *The Haunted Man* and *A Christmas Carol*, it replaced the trap door technique in many productions of *Hamlet*, and the device even spawned some plays written particularly for its use, notably, *Faith, Hope, and Charity* by C.H. Hazelwood which featured the ghost of a woman who returns to haunt her murderer. By the end of the 1960s, the device had mostly outworn its novelty and its size and practical limitations rendered it nearly extinct on major stages. Occasionally, Pepper's device is resurrected for new audiences. In 2010, Richard Maxwell staged a production of short monologues entitled *Ads* that utilized Pepper's Ghost, although with no intention of its original horrific effect.

Ghosts have continued to flourish as theatrical characters, though the means of presenting them have changed. While ghosts are often presented more as symbolic or literary devices on stage, they do on occasion appear accompanied by some of the shock and shivers associated with earlier ghosts. In Conor McPherson's play *Shining City,* for example, a woman's ghost appears in the play's final moments lurking silently behind her still-living husband. As McPherson notes in his stage directions, "…her hair is wet. She looks beaten up. She looks terrifying."

In the earliest years of the 20th century, the new novelty of the film drew audiences out of the stage theatres and into the cinemas. Stage performers from actors to vaudeville performers to magicians began seeking out new avenues for luring audiences back to live performance. One such popular method of entertainment was the midnight ghost show. The ghost show, or 'spook show,' 'horror show,' or 'spooker,' found its beginnings in New York City but made its living touring the united states. They often paired with a horror film shown after. Magician Elwin-Charles Peck is credited with the first ghost show production which was performed at midnight and concluded with a blackout sequence during which luminous figures streaked throughout the theatre.

These productions featured settings suggestive of a Victorian parlour or séance room, and they relied upon ghosts, ghouls and ephemeral creatures to deliver the scares; thus, Peck's show included scenes in which spectral messages magically appeared on slates, tables floated, and an unseen force caused the performer's handkerchief to cavort across the stage (Luckhurst and Marin, 100). Like the Grand Guignol, the ghost shows were interspersed with comic scenes. Effects included the use of "spook paddles": eyes, bats and other symbols of horror were painted on wooden paddles that actors could manipulate during the blackouts. Sometimes, audience members volunteered to paint their faces with the luminescent paint, to the surprise of their nearby seatmates. In order to charge the paint with light and to enhance dramatic effect, most blackout sequences began with a bright flash of light.

In 2010, magicians Penn and Teller staged an off-Broadway production in the tradition of the midnight ghost show, including a blackout sequence. To subvert laws dictating the minimum amount of light allowable in the theatre, the show's house staff was outfitted with night-vision goggles to monitor the audience in case of emergency. Ghosts are often considered difficult, if not impossible, to stage in with any believability in live format. However, performance history shows that audiences are willing, and often eager, to suspend their disbelief and relish the terror of the theatre's ghostly conventions.

While it is rare to find a horror play today, what is clear is that the theatre does historically have a relationship with the horrific and that horror theatre has at some points proven to be a fruitful genre for theatre makers. Of course, the quantity (and often the quality) of horror theatre pales in comparison to the robustness of horror film. The popularity of horror on screen has led a number of recent scholars in film theory and philosophy to wonder about the genre's appeal and function.

"A paradox of the heart": The Appeal of Horror

Noël Carroll derived the subtitle of his book from the essay "On the Pleaseures Derived from Objects of Terror" by the 18th century English poet Anna Letitia Barbauld:

> The painful sensation immediately arising from a scene of misery, is so much softened and alleviated by the reflex sense of self-approbation attending virtuous sympathy, that we find, on the whole, a very exquisite and refined pleasure remaining, which makes us desirous of again being witness to such scenes, instead of flying from them with disgust and horror…But the apparent delight with which we dwell upon objects of pure terror, where our moral feelings are not in the least concerned, and no passion seems to be excited but the depressing one of fear, is a paradox of the heart, much more difficult of solution. (Barbauld, 77)

The question of why so many of us feel pleasure at the sight of the negative images presented to us in horror fictions has been addressed by a number of philosophers, film theorists, and literary scholars. Why should anyone find attractive something that is, by its very definition, repulsive? Why would anyone willingly and often voraciously seek out a story that is intended to solicit negative emotional responses? This "paradox of the heart" does not have a single simple answer.

When Aristotle set out in his *Poetics* to taxonomize drama as a performative genre, he may have also provided one of the first potential solutions to the problem of horror:

> First, the instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood, one difference between him and other animals being that he is the most imitative of living creatures, and through imitation learns his earliest lessons; and no less universal is the pleasure felt in things

> imitated. We have evidence of this in the facts of experience. Objects which in themselves we view with pain, we delight to contemplate when reproduced with minute fidelity: such as the forms of the most ignoble animals and of dead bodies. The cause of this again is that to learn gives the liveliest pleasure…(Aristotle, 55)

Aristotle finds that there is an inherent thrill that comes naturally to all humans in the act of imitation. When children imitate stories of pirates, they are delighted to “walk the plank” instead of fleeing in horror at their classmates’ murderous simulations. As we get older we stop performing these imitations ourselves and seek out well-rehearsed imitations by other adults in the form of fiction. The stories we read in a book or see enacted on a stage have an instructional value. In the case of horror, we may be learning about nightmares, murders, and other objects of fear, but we are learning nonetheless. And according to Aristotle, learning is always a source of pleasure, regardless of the macabre subject matter.

Barbauld offers her own concise answer to this problem of horror later in the “Objects of Terror” essay: “The pain of suspense, and the irresistible desire of satisfying curiosity, when once raised, will account for our eagerness to go quite through an adventure though we suffer actual pain during the whole course of it. We rather chuse to suffer the smart pang of a violent emotion than the uneasy craving of an unsatisfied desire” (Barbauld, 78). We are willing, in other words, to endure unpleasant emotions in order to assuage our curiosity. The “pain” of an unfinished plot is more agonizing than the pain induced by the thought of monsters and madmen.

For his part, Noël Carroll offers a similar hypothesis. Horror, he believes, primarily exists in narrative formats. What makes a story horrific is not strictly the existence of its horrific object (the monster), but rather how that object functions within a narrative structure. Specifically, audience's expectations center on whether or not the monster's existence will be confirmed within the story. Even if the audience is introduced to the monster from the first scene, the characters are oftentimes left to discover its existence later in the narrative. Horror, then, is built on the "drama of iterated disclosure," as first a few characters learn of the monster's existence, then others, then others, etc. "Horror stories, in a significant number of cases, are dramas of proving the existence of the monster and disclosing (most often gradually) the origin, identity, purposes and powers of the monster." (Carroll, 182) As Carroll's monsters are all necessarily non-existent supernatural creatures, he finds the locus of the audience's curiosity in uncovering the nature and history of the unfamiliar beast.

In this view, the pleasure that an audience derives in horror fictions is a product of the satiation of an agitated curiosity. The "pain", to use a term found in both Barbauld and Aristotle, that these images evince is "the price to be paid for the pleasure of their disclosure" (Carroll, 184). Pain is the necessary counterpoint to pleasure. In order for Carroll's monsters to be pleasurable, they must also be truly horrible. They are, as stated earlier, interstitial creatures: both alive and dead, animal and human, they are also both abhorrent and marvelous.

Carroll admits to some limitations in his hypothesis. Satisfaction of narrative curiosity does not account for horror in static forms, like paintings or photographs, and it does not cover what he terms "pure confrontation plots" in horror stories in which no discovery is made of the monster but a narrative is created by an onslaught of human versus monster scenes. To cover these holes in his theory, Carroll adds that the monster, aside from narrative concerns, can itself elicit both fascination and disgust. Humans are desirous of witnessing unusual and aberrant creatures, even when they are also repelled by them. While horror is most frequently propelled by narrative disclosures, the fascinating nature of monsters can be draw enough to induce art-horror.

It is certainly entertaining and intellectually gratifying to witness the revelation of the monsters of horror stories. However, I believe audience curiosity is aroused less by what the monster *is* and more by what it will *do*. Horror monsters typically derive from a handful of stock types. They are demons hiding in the bodies of young girls (*The Exorcist, The Quiet Ones, The Exorcism of Emily Rose, Possession*). They are thin dead women with long hair and a thirst for vengeance *(Ju-On The Grudge, The Ring, The Woman in Black*). They are classic monsters of literature like Dracula, Frankenstein's Creature, or the werewolf. The monsters' most fundamental features are already familiar to an initiated audience, leaving little to discover. Often, the details of the monster's make-up or the specifics of its origins are inconsequential.

More importantly, we want to know if the monster (or monstrous figure) will kill any victims or only frighten them. *How* will its savagery be enacted? What means of murder will it employ? Why the monsters kill is often largely irrelevant. Even in stories where the murderer takes extreme measures to ensure that his motivations are made clear, like in the films *Saw* or *Se7en* in which the killer expresses his rationale in no unclear terms, the *means* he employs to conduct his murders is always more fascinating than the motives. In the end, we may be propelled by a desire to know whether or not a monster is caught or destroyed, but we are only interested in the monster's fate if we are also interested in its methods of destruction. In *Dreadful Pleasures*, James Twitchell writes, “Stories don’t carry horror; images do.” (Twitchell, 58) The most memorable images in horror are the result of what the monster has done. The image of Regan’s spinning head in *The Exorcist* carries a far more lasting impact than the origins of her tormentor.

This theory of the pleasure of horror also avoids another concern of Carroll’s. Why, if audiences are curious about the nature and history of a monster, should they seek out horror fictions specifically? Why not non-horror forms like fairy tales or fantasy in which there are supernatural monsters but no threat of discomfort? Carroll implies that most horror fans *do* seek monsters in these other genres but that the greater risk of horror equates to a greater pleasurable reward. Experience indicates that this is not verifiably true. Fans of fantasy are not necessarily fans of horror – horror fans may not even cross over into the realm of science fiction, its close cousin, or between sub-genres of horror. This is because the fans are interested in what the monster *does*, not who it is. They are less interested in its existential nature, which may be further developed in forms like fantasy and which may follow set rules in each horror sub-genre, than they are in its terrible actions.

Ultimately, it is most important that the monster’s actions are *terrible*. Where Carroll goes wrong is in painting the negative emotions horror can incite as simply a necessary evil of the genre. Instead, it seems observably true that audiences *relish* the most painful moments. The more terrible and terrifying the monster’s actions, the more delight an audience takes in the fiction. Audiences simultaneously cheer and cringe at the most horrific moments. They are excited by the negative emotions themselves, not simply tolerant of them. As Carol Clover writes, “To the extent that a movie succeeds in ‘hurting’ its viewers…it is good horror; to the extent that it fails, it is bad horror; to the extent that is does not try, it is not horror but something else” (Clover 229). The best horror does not go easy on its audiences in order to deliver pleasure; they know that the most delight is found in the moments of the most pain.

Psychoanalytic Theories of Horror

From the late 1970s to the early 1990s, it was particularly popular among academics to turn to psychoanalysis to explain the problem of the pleasure found in horror. The basis of most psychoanalytic theories is derived from Sigmund Freud’s 1919 essay on “The Uncanny” in which Freud makes a rare excursion into the aesthetics of fiction and attempts to explain the pleasure derived from consuming horrific narratives.

As Freud explains, the word ‘uncanny’ equates to ‘*unheimlich*’ in German, a word that would be more closely rendered in English as ‘un-homely’. The word has an association with the familiar (the home) while the addition of the prefix turns its meaning into something un-familiar. The uncanny is thus something which was once familiar, but is now unfamiliar. More specifically, Freud defines it as something we once knew but have since forgotten or repressed. When we encounter something that we would identify as ‘uncanny,’ it is because we are experiencing a re-acquaintance with a feeling or belief that we once held as truth but since have lost.

Freud identifies two primary types of uncanny experiences. The first addresses the return of repressed infantile complexes such as the Oedipal complex, castration complex, and the like. The second, which is perhaps easier to understand within the broad context of horror fictions generally, addresses the return of repressed, primitive systems of belief.

As an example of the second form of uncanny experience, a girl may have believed as a child that dead people could reanimate their spirits in the form of ghosts and return to haunt the living. With age and education, however, her belief begins to diminish even to the point that as an adult she finds the belief silly. However, when reading a ghost story, she begins to feel a return of the repressed belief and shudders at the idea that she may have dismissed the idea of ghosts too soon. As Freud writes:

> Today we no longer believe in them [ghosts, demons and the like], having *surmounted* such modes of thought. Yet we do not feel entirely secure in these new convictions; the old ones live on in us, on the look-out for confirmation. Now, as soon as something *happens* in our lives that seems to confirm these old, discarded beliefs, we experience a sense of the uncanny. (Freud, 154)

This "something" that induces a resurgence of repressed modes of thought can be an event as quotidian as glimpsing the shadow of a coat rack in the dark that takes on a vaguely human form, or it can be a structured ghost story in a horror film.

In the 2014 horror film, *The Quiet Ones*, Professor Joseph Coupland (played by Jared Harris) attempts to assuage a rattled colleague after they witness a seemingly paranormal event by utilizing an idea rooted in Freud and the uncanny. The professor tells the younger man, "You're scared because you can't explain what you've seen. So your mind falls back on the stories that scared you as a child. Evil spirits and such."

While not an exact summary of Freud's theory, Professor Coupland's statement reaffirms the psychoanalytic relationship between fear and familiarity. When something feels unfamiliar (un-homely), it induces feelings of the uncanny. Our minds subconsciously dredge up repressed beliefs to make sense of mystifying events.

So why are some fictions that feature ghosts and other monsters uncanny, while others are not? Why does the ghost of *The Woman in Black* fill us with dread while the ghosts of *Macbeth* or *Hamlet* (most often) do not? The experience of the uncanny is dependent on the type of reality painted by the author of a fiction. Fairy tales (and the tales of Shakespeare, according to Freud) are *always* inhabited by supernatural creatures. We are willing to accept the universe the author has depicted as naturally full of supernatural monsters, and so, "such figures forfeit any uncanny quality that might otherwise attach to them" (Freud, 156). In horror fictions, however, the world of the fiction is much more similar to the world we know as everyday reality. Ghosts and demons do not plague our ordinary lives or the ordinary lives of the characters. When monsters do appear, it is a break from reality, an abominable aberration. The faith we have in our adult belief systems is severed and repressed beliefs rush in to fill the void. A successful horror will lead us, and the characters in it, to experience the uncanny and revisit repressed ideas. With very successful horrors, the uncanny feeling will linger with us long after the fiction has ended, leaving us checking around dark corners for spirits and sociopaths for days to come.

When examined closely, Freud's essay actually does little to define what is pleasurable about experiencing the uncanny. A return of repressed beliefs does not explain why people seek out and enjoy horror fictions. In fact, it seems that one would want to avoid such experiences. After all, these jejune beliefs have presumably been repressed for a reason. What is perhaps implied in Freud's work is a sort of 'safety valve' feature at work in horror, wherein repressed complexes and id-driven desires are allowed to safely and briefly expose themselves in a way that is cathartic and freeing. Behavior that has been repressed as a result of age and societal expectation is allowed to take a brief visit to the surface through the vicarious witness of horrific fictions. As James Twitchell writes, "horror 'pulls the pop-top' off repressed urges to let them escape via the fizz of fantasy." (Twitchell, 65)

Freud provided only a cursory explanation of the uncanny, which is perhaps why so many scholars have been compelled to expand on his theories, whether by drawing on other Freudian texts to supplement the psychoanalytic appeal of horror, or by layering on additional, original theories. In her influential book, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, Carol Clover does both, drawing on Freudian texts to explain the appeal of horror in specifically gendered terms.

Clover bases her theories on the empirical (but statistically unsubstantiated) claim that horror films are, by and large, made for and consumed almost exclusively by young males. (In fact, she admits that she has "consigned to virtual invisibility all other members of the audience") (Clover, 7). Though she makes a foray into supernatural and exorcism stories, her work is primarily based on slasher films, like *Halloween* or *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, which enjoyed their apex in the 1970s and '80s, but continue to be revitalized in reboots even today. In the traditional narrative of a slasher film, a solo, sexually perturbed male commits a series of murders on (mostly) young, sexually liberated women. The killer is eventually thwarted, or at least temporarily stymied until the inevitable sequel, by what Clover terms the “Final Girl.” Unlike her teenage friends, who are destined to be fatally sliced or sawed by the killer, the Final Girl is bookish, boyish, and sexually bland. She is the locus of the killer’s unfaltering rage, which renders her a victim, but she is also the hero who, through wit and determination, finds a way to overcome the monster and escape with her life. As the terrified victim, the Final Girl’s behavior is coded as feminine, but as the avenging hero, she is simultaneously coded as masculine.

Unlike several other scholars, Clover rejects the overly simplistic notion that slasher films are nothing more than thinly veiled rape fantasies, allowing male audiences to identify with the male killer as he penetrates sexually transgressive women with his conspicuously phallic knife. These arguments, in which horror is treated as almost absurdly misogynistic, fail to acknowledge the existence and importance of the Final Girl as much as they are blind to the sexual deficiencies of the killer. According to Clover, (male) audiences do identify with the male serial killer and cheer on his murders, but they are eagerly willing to reverse camps and identify with the Final Girl, often cheering even more emphatically as the killer gets his comeuppance.

The slasher film, Clover contests, “speaks deeply and obsessively to male anxieties and desires” (Clover, 61), specifically Freudian-derived anxieties. Horror, as “the form that most obviously trades in the repressed,” speaks to a number of male complexes (Clover, 20). For instance, Clover references the “Terrible Place,” a house, tunnel, or other dark locale in which the killer quietly lurks. The Terrible Place “at first may seem a safe haven, but the same walls that promise to keep the killer out quickly become, once the killer penetrates them, the walls that hold the victim in” (Clover, 31). Clover describes the Terrible Place as “intrauterine” in quality and connects this dark place to Freud’s contention that for “neurotic men” there is “something uncanny about the female genital organs.” (Freud, 151). Slasher films also address castration anxieties as the male audience member is emasculated by demonstrating his fear, particularly when witnessing the aggressively masculine actions of the Final Girl.

In Clover’s view, slasher films are pleasurable because they allow male audiences to experiment with the Freudian concept of “feminine masochism.” Male viewers flirt with otherwise repressed desires for abjection, passivity, and even penetration through identification with the *victims* of horror films. In this view, horror is not about sadism, but a decidedly feminine form of masochism, as men willingly subject themselves to the “’feminine’ experience” of watching horror stories (Clover, 61). Clover sees this masochism as a pervasive aspect of horror fictions: “the masochistic aesthetic is and has always been the dominant one in horror cinema and is in fact one of that genre’s defining characteristics” (Clover, 222).

Certainly, there are a number of concerns that can be raised with Clover’s theory. If horror is contingent on feminine masochism, why would any woman find the genre attractive at all (including Clover herself, who purports to be a “fan”)? Should we understand these masochistic desires as perverse and unusual or as a natural part of adolescent development? Are audiences conscious of their relationship to the feminine masochistic and how do these desires relate to other less clearly gendered genres of horror? With such an age- and gender-based analysis of horror, it is difficult to see the broader societal functions that horror may possess.

The Social Functions of Horror

Philip J. Nickel turns the problem of horror on its head by asking not what is *pleasurable* about horror, but what is *good* about it. Nickel believes that horror has an epistemological value in its ability to “[help] us see that a notion of everyday life completely secure against threats cannot be possible, and that the security of common sense is a persistent illusion” (Nickel, 17). Nickel’s work shows that despite the fantastic nature of many horror films, they intend to comment on events of every day life and the uncertainty in our day-to-day stability. “Horror’s bite”, he writes, “is explained as a sudden tearing-away of the intellectual trust that stands behind our actions” (Nickel, 28).

Unlike in a documentary about truly horrific real-world events, say the avian flu, horror films place the dangers of something like a viral outbreak in the present tense. The dangers are here and now. Horror is good because it allows us to recognize that we are still capable of action, of continuing a joyful existence, even in the face of existential uncertainty.

Nickel’s views are supported by Dennis L. White, whose analysis of “The Poetics of Horror” also emphasizes the genre’s ability to strip away the fundamental assumptions and beliefs we carry in order to feel safe in the every day world. For instance, White finds that horror “nullifies the usual clues and indicators we use in judging what to expect of people.” (White, 13). Such uncertainty can be seen in horror films like *Psycho* in which the seemingly benign and polite Norman Bates is also a serial murderer. Our predisposed assumptions, such as the belief that nice-looking young men like Norman Bates do not commit murder or that our psyches will never give themselves over completely to the id and turn us into Mr. Hydes or that darkened hallways do not house angry ghosts, are disrupted in horror stories. “The horror film, however, can dramatize the frailty and arbitrariness of such assumptions in its characters and institutions, and can let us see our assumptions in a more critical way than is comfortable.” (White, 10) Questioning our fundamental beliefs also raises many of the most fundamental existential questions, which may be what led White to make the rather grandiose claim, “Even the most simple-minded horror film, as if by accident, asks the same questions as do the greatest works of art” (White, 9).

Another scholar with a somewhat turgid theory for the function of horror in society is James B. Twitchell, whose 1985 book, *Dreadful Pleasures*, charts the history of the classic horror monsters Dracula, Frankenstein and the werewolf from cave drawings to modern film. Twitchell proposes a three-fold theory for the psychological appeal of horror:

> The attraction of horror can be understood in essentially three ways: (1) as counterphobia or the satisfaction of overcoming objects of fear; (2) as the “return of the repressed” or the compulsive projection of objects of sublimated desires; and (3) as part of a more complicated rite of passage from onanism to reproductive sexuality.

The first two of Twitchell’s proposed functions of horror are already familiar. Firstly, it acts as a safe and controlled vehicle for facing certain types of fear. Secondly, Twitchell pronounces his reliance on Freudian psychoanalysis. But it is the third point which most interests Twitchell and which is indeed the most unusual.

As with Carol Clover, for Twitchell, it seemed observably true that horror films (he is less sure about horror literature and he feels horror is no longer possible in the theatre) had an extremely homogenous audience. He feels that horror films were exclusively created for and consumed by teenage boys and their female dates. While the primary audience was consistently predictable, there were a few aberrant outliers: “although most of the audience are in their early- to mid-teens, a number of older men (never women) are also present, usually sitting separately, often by themselves” (Twtichell, 69). Twitchell is extremely critical of these “older men” (he, of course, excludes himself from this group by virtue of his status as an academic researcher). Twitchell goes so far as to accuse these men of attending horror films in order to fantasize about and cheer for the female characters’ rape and projects on them secret pedophilic urges by categorizing them as a bunch of “sour Humbert Humberts” (Twitchell, 70). Thus, the only *normal* people who attended horror films must be the teenagers.

Why would horror appeal strictly to an adolescent audience? Because horror films carry an important function in society as a “rite of passage” from pre-sexual youth into fully-sexual young adulthood. Twtichell notes that the late puberty stage of human development is frequently a time when specific cultural rites and rituals are performed to educate and celebrate the youth as he enters into sexual maturity. Citing rituals like the circumcision rites of the tribal Aranda in Central Australia, Twitchell points out the frequency of ceremonial events in many cultures designed to “guid[e] its young past the anxieties of reproductive sexuality” (Twitchell, 88). Western tradition, however, is seemingly lacking in these teenage rituals. However, Twitchell feels that “these rites of passage are occurring every day (or every weekend)” on cinema screens. The horror film has become the modern initiation rite leading youth into adulthood.

Horror films, in this view, are intended to instruct youth on proper sexual behavior and to literally scare them away from improper behavior. The monsters of horror are frequently sexually confused and underdeveloped (or perhaps in a state of hyper-puberty like the hirsute wolfman who preys on young virgins). Horror monsters, like teenagers, have a strong sexual drive but little knowledge of how to sate their urges in a healthy manner; horror teaches young adults how to correctly express their burgeoning sexuality.

But what specifically does horror teach against? In Twitchell’s view, the answer is simple:

> I think that along with all the other phobic explanations of the attraction of horror (fear of insanity, death, madness, homosexuality, castration) the fear of incest underlies all horror myths in our culture that are repeatedly told for more than one generation (Twitchell, 93).

Here, Twitchell argues that the cultural proscription against incest is not genetically instinctive, it must be culturally learned. The genetic aberrations associated with children produced in incestual couplings are not caused by incest *per se* but can form by compounding the genes of *any* two individuals with similar genetic predispositions. Since our bodies do not prohibit incest, our culture must.

Where exactly Twitchell locates the proscription against incest within horror mythos is a bit muddy. Yes, Dracula is a (much, much) older man who typically preys on young women with his particularly sexualized form of attack, but a difference in age is hardly sufficient to symbolize a father-daughter relationship. While Twitchell's analysis of the function of horror may be a rather aggrandized, it is interesting to note that both Twitchell and Clover sense that horror holds a special appeal to adolescents.

Audiences

At the time Twitchell was writing, it may have been verifiably true that teenagers were the primary audience for horror films. However, teenagers were (and still are) the primary audience attending the cinema for *any* genre. Movie theatres are traditionally adolescent friendly environments, allowing teenagers to congregate after dark away from the prying eyes of their parents. If Twitchell is primarily referring to audiences of a sub-genre of horror film, he does not specify, although his claims seem most fitting to slasher films, which Carol Clover refers to as "beyond the purview of the respectable (middle-aged, middle-class) audience" (Clover, 21).

Little reliable data exists about the consumers of horror fictions. It is impossible to say who exactly is watching horror films in the theatres, following horror television, or reading horror literature at home. Certainly, it would seem that horror films today are full of fewer "Humbert Humberts" and more ordinary Joes. However, if the audience for horror does skew young, horror theatre may be a way for companies to address their persistent concern with the difficulties of attracting young audiences.

In horror theory, there exists an obvious bias presuming that fans of horror fictions are typically not only young, but also of lower economic classes. Perhaps this is because horror so often directly addresses economic issues and class divides.

Frequently, horror stories take place in poor, country environments, where the inhabitants are “considerably poorer than their city visitors” (Clover, 126). The arrival of wealthy urbanites triggers the release of violent and deadly rebellion against their presence. Additionally, there has been a significant amount of discourse relating zombie stories to anxieties over capitalism.

While there is still significant demographic research to be done regarding on consumers of horror fiction, it seems that its presumed audiences are not what is thought of as the average American theatergoer. In this sense, horror theatre may be a way to expand the traditional audiences for theatre, as the established older, wealthier audience continues to dwindle. However, I suspect that the true audiences for horror theatre may be even broader and more inclusive than scholars may presume.

Ultimately, it may not be possible to identify a single, unifying theory that explains the attraction of horror. Nonetheless, horror’s appeal is widespread. As critic Steven Schneider has noted, “Like tragedy, horror promotes emotional catharsis in audiences; like fantasy, it offers viewers an escape from the tedium of everyday life; like comedy, it provides a relatively safe (because relatively disguised/distorted) forum for the expression of socio-cultural fears”. We can only speculate on the future potential audiences for horror theatre.

Conclusion

Whether the play’s special effects are as complex as those of the Grand Guignol, or as slight as those of *The Woman in Black*, horror plot structures are typically rather simple and formulaic. Noël Carroll describes the most common plot structure of horror fictions as the “Complex Discovery Plot.” This plot structure is defined by four major elements: onset, when the audience is first introduced to the monster; discovery, when the character(s) are first made aware of the monster; confirmation, when the discoverers inform other characters of the monster; and confrontation, when the human characters come head-to-head with their monstrous foe. There also exist a number of variations on this basic plot structure formed by omitting one or more of the four primary elements. For instance, Carroll describes Orson Welles’ radio adaptation of *War of the Worlds* as following an “onset/confrontation” plot. The Martians arrive on earth and immediately begin their battle with humanity, leaving no room for discovery or need for the confirmation of their existence (Carroll, 111). As Carroll believes that the pleasure of horror resides in the revelation of its supernatural monsters, it seems appropriate that he would focus his plot analyses on moments of discovery.

Even further distilling the basic plots of horror stories, Carroll writes, “The conflict between humanity and the inhuman, or between normal and the abnormal, is fundamental to horror” (Carroll, 126). Questions of the knowable versus the unknowable are elemental in horror fiction. Horror stories are not interested in examining nuanced psychologies or, say, exploring the ennui of the everyman’s quotidian existence. Horror pits ordinary humans against wildly unordinary monsters and challenges them to fight their way back to normalcy.

If horror fictions are so formulaic, why do audiences continue to take interest in them? Horror fans seem to relish the predictability of horror stories, particularly in popular horror films and their endless sequels. Andrew Britton noted with a hint of surprise that during a screening of the 1981 movie *Hell Night*, “The film’s total predictability did not create boredom or disappointment. On the contrary, the predictability was clearly the main source of pleasure” (Clover, 9). Carol Clover suggests that horror stories serve similar functions as myth and folklore, and that like folklore, their formulaic plot lines are part of their appeal: “Students of folklore or early literature recognize in horror the hallmarks of oral narrative: the free exchange of themes and motifs, the archetypal characters and situations, the accumulation of sequels, remakes, imitations” (Clover, 10-11). Perhaps playwrights have largely avoided horror stories in an effort to cling to a sense of personal originality. Assuming horror stories derive from only a handful of ur-myths, they rarely make an effort to hide their supporting structures. Horror is a genre in which the story’s scaffolding is as important as its accents. It may be important for playwrights to remember that predictability is not a sign of a writer’s creative weakness, but rather the trademark of a well-versed horror artist.

Instead of folklore, Harmony Wu, editor of a special issue on horror in the *Spectator* at the University of Southern California School of Cinematic Arts, compares the structure of horror stories to the formulaic structures of melodrama. As a point of departure, Wu turns to Peter Brook’s *The Melodramatic Imagination* and its critical interpretations by scholar Linda Williams. Like melodrama, Wu argues, horror is built on fictional universes where moral systems are starkly naked. Horror stories and melodramas are constructed around “narratives of ‘virtue’ beset by ‘villainy,’ manichean characters, and thematic returns to a space of 'innocence.'" She adds, "Horror's manifest (not hidden or masked) interests lie in dramatizing struggles between suffering victims…and powerful villainy" (Wu, 5). However, horror's form is only melodramatic on its surface. Its core purpose is directly opposed to that of melodrama. Where melodrama exists to perpetuate the idea that moral order will prevail, that the good will be rewarded and the evil punished, horror highlights "an essential untenability of the presumed foundation of moral justness and victories of goodness and virtue" (Wu, 7). This sentiment was echoed by famed horror film director George A. Romero in a discussion of his highly-influential 1968 zombie film *Night of the Living Dead* in the 2010 documentary, *Nightmares in Red, White and Blue.* Romero states that the reason he makes horror films is to "upset the apple cart." His intention, however, unlike in melodrama, is never to set it right again.

Creating a vibrant and effective horror theatre requires involving all aspects of the creation of a play, including the script, design, direction and, importantly, marketing. Establishing an environment conducive to eliciting art-horror begins even before the play has begun. Carol Clover notes that in horror film, the audiences' "emotional engagement with the movie begins while they are standing in line" (Clover, 9). It may be even more accurate to say that audiences begin preparing themselves to view a horror story when they first encounter its advertising. At the first image they encounter from a horror film, audiences begin to imagine the grisly terrors it will present, which builds anticipation and excitement for the film. Theatre makers should take note of this phenomenon. Horror theatre should not shy away from marketing itself as such, as horror as a genre is anything but sheepish.

There are a number of objections that can be raised with the idea of creating a horror theatre. First, it is often believed that creating a horror theatre would be extremely difficult, burdensome, or expensive. However, if horror films are any indication, this is simply not the case. “B” horror films, with low budgets and less sophisticated effects, are often the most popular with horror fans. The lack of big-budget effects forces film directors to find more creative tactics for inducing fear. One of the most often-cited examples of this phenomenon is the 1999 film *The Blair Witch Project*. This film, which is now considered a horror classic, was created on an initial budget of only $35,000. Its tactics were impressively simplistic: the film’s horrific effects were created strictly though suspense, sounds and silence. The actors improvised the majority of the action and it features no major special effects, no scenes of graphic violence, and no direct revelation of the film’s central monster. Despite (or perhaps because of) its minimalist style, *Blair Witch* became one of the most popular horror films of the early 21st century. The film was recognized by a variety of awards organizations, and according to figures on imbd.com, grossed over $140 million making it the third-highest grossing horror film of the last twenty years. Creating horror theatre does not have to be done with big budgets, it has to be done with bright minds willing to experiment with darkness, silence, suspense and all the other staples of horror.

Additionally, I have spoken to a handful of theatre professionals who worry that an audience for horror theatre does not exist. This fear seems to be founded in the belief that current theatre subscriber bases are typically composed of older, more aesthetically conservative audiences. If these audiences are not interested in horror, who would attend a horror play? Again, this argument is easily dismissed by examining horror fictions in other media. The-numbers.com, a website designed to track film box office sales, lists 30 major horror films released in 2014 with total gross sales of over $245 million. The most popular year for horror films in the last two decades was 2007, in which mainstream horror movies grossed almost $700 million. Horror author Stephen King has an estimated net worth of nearly $400 million and is one of the most prolific authors in history. Clearly, there is an audience for horror fictions in general and it would seem logical to guess that more than a few of these horror fans may be interested in attending the theatre to witness their favorite genre in a live format. Even if it is true that current theatre audiences are not horror fans (although I suspect it is not), the theatre community certainly has room to expand its audience base. By making horror fans feel welcome and included, horror theatre may present an opportunity for theatres to broaden their spectatorship.

By largely ignoring horror, the contemporary theatre community has excluded a large and notoriously enthusiastic audience base. While the genre has a rich and robust history in other media and a few very successful iterations in the history of theatre, there are startlingly few theatres producing horror plays today. Horror stories speak to the most universal human fears and demonstrate humanity's ability to overcome an unending series of anxieties. As popular horror film director John Carpenter has noted, "fear is probably the most powerful emotion we all feel as humans. We're all afraid of death, loss of a loved one, loss of identity." These fears are addressed in the most direct way in horror stories. It is an aggressive genre that requires aggressive and fearless theatre artists, who are studied in the iconography of horror, to realize its stories on stage.

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