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"... It does seem to be a fact": Audience Knowledge and a Sociohistorical Approach to the

Horrific Grotesque in *Night of the Living Dead*

by

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Abstract

This is an essay synthesizing the sociohistorical Gothic theory of Jose Monleon and a theory of the grotesque developed by Edwards & Graulund, as applied to *Night of the Living Dead* by George A. Romero. The study begins with a series of general theoretical and synthetic treatments of the horror genre culminating in a consideration of the two-act theory of horror operation, and proceeds with an application of this theoretical framework to the film *Night of the Living Dead*. This analysis concludes that embedded within this film is an opportunity for critical address for the social circumstances of its emergence, and that this potential may be generalizable to other works in the horror genre. The work closes with a general discussion of findings and concepts for further analysis.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Where do monsters come from? What allows them to work? What do or must audiences bring to the experience of horror? Consider a for-instance. You are sitting in a movie theater. You're here with your partner, who has told you this film is "terrifying", and people are saying it's one of the best horror movies this year. The film begins, and it's been rolling for about 15 minutes, when suddenly something emerges from a dank cellar. Or the woods. Or the sky. Or from inside a supporting character. What is that thing? It's half man, half animal, half machine, half insect, half luminous cloud. It's a thing made of contradictions, of fearful combinatorials, and it wants the protagonist dead. You are terrified. This monster is libidinous, is cannibalistic, is sexually ambiguous, is of questionable origin. It not only wants to destroy the protagonist, it wants to bring to an end the American way of life. Or the British way of life. Or the Spanish way of life. Luckily, through great effort, the plucky, comfortably normative protagonist (he is straight, his provenance is known, he is probably handsome, he is probably a "he") destroys this mass of monstrous contradictions. He gets the girl, the American way is saved, and you feel good. On reflection, why? What has allowed this story to so deftly play on your sense of what is whole, what is monstrous, and why has its banishment been so satisfying? What did you just see?

Questions as to the origins of horror and the horror experience seem often to center on what makes a monster. A great variety of theorists have tried their hands at defining what constitutes monstrosity, what makes it function, what makes a monster, and why people feel compelled to expose themselves to narratives of monstrosity year in and year out. While I think many of these theories are useful in their description and operation, I think many of them stop short of the kinds of explanation that would make such a discussion truly tractive, and that they

instead spend their time in description. Such description is again quite useful, but it doesn't do the whole job.

One of the first theorists of the horrific was Ann Radcliff, author of the now seminal essay, "The Supernatural in Poetry." In the form of a dialogue, she allows two of her characters to wax theoretical in their experience of Shakespeare, particularly his use of description, clear and unclear, to create his emotional effects. Her conversationalists conclude through their discussion that the primary difference between horror and terror, two emotions which will be made distinct through the history of horror theorization, lies in the level of ambiguity present in the representation. Terror is described as a definitional indeterminacy, a sense of unclarity preceding the actually experience of its object. In this way, terror is a route to the sublime, itself an emotion which combines effect with ambiguity of lack of full knowledge. Horror, in contrast, is the experience of the horrific object in its wholeness. If terror is the noise behind the closed door, horror is the shambling thing revealed. This same framework has been taken up by other theorists, most popularly contemporary horror author Stephen King, in his book Danse Macabre, where he makes a further distinction between Horror and Gross-Out. Radcliffe's distinction is instructive. This thesis will concern itself primarily with the second element she considers, Horror, insofar as it will primarily be addressed not to the experience of horror, but to the reality of horrific objects. In Radcliffe's terminology, I will primarily be concerned with Horror rather than Terror.

Whence then comes Horror? As mentioned above, while true explanations of the emergence of horrific imagery, the "origin story" of monsters, is a rarity, a great many writers have described monsters and their qualities in phenomenal depth. While there is a great deal of accord in these descriptions, they do diverge at points. Philosopher Noel Carroll's description of

monsters centers on their status as "category violations," uniting domains or categories of human thought that should not go together. Anthropologist David Gilmore describes them instead as possessing recognizably human traits, even if these traits remain as limited as the possession of agency, though possessing at least one quality that is blown out of proportion. Monstrous teeth or claws quite often serve this purpose. Medievalist Jeffrey Cohen does not give a comprehensive definition, instead describing monsters according to their participation in a field of qualities, esconcing these in Seven Theses, including such elements as, "The Monstrous Body is the Cultural Body," and "The Monster is a Harbinger of Category Crisis." His description, as with the other theorists mentioned, seem to describe monsters both according to their qualities and according to what they "do." Jose Monleon, who I will be using for the majority of my treatment, describes monsters somewhat according to Cohen's "cultural body" thesis, identifying them as reflections or representations of cultural designations centering on contribution or lack of contribution to wider cultural aims.

There are some useful commonalities between these definitions. First and foremost, all of these theorists define monsters according to their bringing together of incompatible elements. Monsters should not be, within a traditional model of the universe, or at least they should not be as they are. Whether the elements a monster brings together in a single agent are exaggerations or modifications of elements which may natively belong together, or whether they are more radical composites uniting qualities which should never be brought together in a single figure, they are in every instance a confluence of incompatible parts. Secondly, this combinatoriality makes monsters threatening. It's not enough that a figure unite two elements that should not go together--this coming together must constitute something of a threat to their observers. Monsters must be seen, and they must be seen as dangerous.

This is a very good description of what monsters are and what they look like, and its elements are shared to a great extent between theorists coming from a good variety of academic fields. What it is not, however, is an explanation of how monsters emerge. To touch on the two elements common to theoretical definitions, what is it that allows us to identify a monster as constituting a categorical violation, a combination which should not be? And according to what criteria can such a representation be considered threatening? These questions are necessary preconditions for what may become a more interesting question: How have monsters been deployed in the past for critical effect? That is, knowing the raison d'etre of monstrosity is the elicitation of terror and horror, how have artists used an expectation of this effect in order to deploy imagery with a critical cultural effect?

This thesis will attempt to synthesize a potential answer to the above three questions. In the present work, I will first explore the sociohistorical operation of the horror genre within an historical context using theorist Jose Monleon's concept of "unreason" through a theory of the grotesque. This will consist of an exploration and some instantiations of Monleon's theory, as well as an exploration of how this theory interacts with the broader conception of a grotesque aesthetic. I will then explore how the operation of this sociohistorical function relies upon systems of audience knowledge and presupposition. To do this, I will rely on theories of intertextuality, as well as the work of rhetorician Kendall Phillips in order to understand how the presuppositional structure of the horror genre may open the way for critical effect. To provide an artifactual backbone, to these theoretical considerations, I will ground my analysis in an occasional analysis of the film *Night of the Living Dead* by George A. Romero.

Horror has been theorized as long as it's been a recognized genre, and as such I have no expectation that I will close any book whatsoever in this conversation. As is apparent in

examining the commonalities between theorists of the monstrous, even those coming from entirely distinct disciplines, I believe many theorists are describing the same phenomena in their work, and I will retread much ground that has already been trod here. However, I will attempt within this work to synthesize something a bit new, to integrated a number of theoretical perspectives to internally consistently answer our three questions--What categories do monsters violate? What makes these violations threatening? How has this been used to critical effect? If I am able to construct something like a coherent synthesis capable of answering these question without mishandling the vast theoretical lore that the horror genre has generated, I think I will have accomplished something.

Chapter 2: Horror as Sociohistorical Grotesque

In this chapter, I'll adumbrate theorist, critic, and Spanish-language author Jose Monleon's approach to the sociohistorical evolution of the Gothic genre and its passage through distinct relationships with the social body. I'll then briefly explore this theory as an interpretation or instantiation of the Grotesque, derived from Edwards and Graulund's formulation (as well as those of others), in order to understand the shifts in representation through Monleon's epochs.

Monleon and Sustained Unreason

In *A Specter is Haunting Europe*, Jose Monleon's only significant work translated into English, he takes an approach to the gothic genre situated in terms of its historical evolution against the events of the emerging era of industrialism within which it flourished. He characterizes the development of notions of the supernatural gothic genre as located within a broader social context informing possible locations of the monstrous. To accomplish this, he borrows Todorov's characterization of the fantastic to refer to gothic monstrosity (Monleon 3). According to his account, at the time of the earliest works of Gothic fiction, monstrosity is essentially an artifact of the outskirts, something that occurs in poor-houses and mad-houses and work-houses (30-31). Each of these is a habitation designed to contain, confine, and delimit the location of that which is conceived of as threateningly external. As the age progresses, however, and as industrialism takes root within England, this strict locationality begins to decay, and the monstrous externality of the poor, the mad, the criminal, is gradually reintegrated with society. This is accompanied by a shift in the ways the culture conceived of the monstrous. From a phenomenon of the outskirts, the fantastic and monstrous, that which was characterized by a spirit of *unreason*, was found to be implicit in the very structures of order according to which culture operated. Within fantastic literary output, this shift was reflected through portrayals of

monstrosity which originated from within the body of society itself. Reason became the birthing place of unreason.

While Monleon's approach to these concepts emerges as essentially economic, it not a stretch to extend them to cultural categories as such. Within his treatment, Monleon identifies the *unreason* he describes with absence of utility or belonging within the economic systems within the cultures he describes. What this means is that the poor, the indigent, the mentally ill who exemplify the kinds of unreasoned actors who find their way into representations of the Gothic monstrous are characterized as such by virtue of their lack of placement within the society at large. Within the machinery of Victorian England, those who were useless seemed to defy the subjectivizing and ordering logic of the industrial ethos, embodying an impossibility of category which therefore placed them in tension with the culture which created them. The character by which these individuals are therefore in conflict with the machinery of the culture in which they live but cannot economically participate seems to be an instantiation of a broader impossibility of belonging. Either economically or otherwise, this seems to be an instance of the "othering" of those for whom there is no place, a phenomenon certainly not limited to the realm of the economic.

It would seem intuitive that order, either economic or social, would have to exist as a precedent to the emergence of disorder--it's not a coincidence that the gothic genre as identified by Monleon only began to exist at the emergence of enlightenment thinking, a paradigm which envisioned the world as an ordered system in which humans might be rational participants. Monleon's evolution inward seems to reflect the increasing immanence of the unreason he describes as the culture becomes increasingly ordered, increasingly coherent. As the society evolves into greater and greater manifestations of social order, more and more is consumed, is

normalized, is foreclosed, resulting in a system in which nothing is rejected, nothing is on the "outside." Though nothing then exists on the outside, monstrosity remains. Crime, poverty, instability, violence--each of these persists as a cultural reality, a site of internal contradiction within the cultural substrate. It is almost as though the need to place these monstrous elements within a culture led to an ever-intensifying cultural anxiety as to the location of monstrosity. What was once safely on the outskirts, blameable and distant, suddenly erupted from within the cultural heart. Absent a safely identifiable externality, the culture had no choice but to find unreason within its own heart.

Monleon himself contextualizes his approach to the Gothic within Todorov's fantastic, which is that synaptic time between the presentation of the ambiguously fantastical and its collapse either into true fantasy or its revelation as an explicable illusion (Todorov 25). As such, the fantastic is characterized as a suspended unreason, an indeterminacy. Monleon doesn't argue but instead suggests in the scope of his survey that this fantastic is most often experienced as horrific. Just as the fantastic is defined as that space of unknowing, so horror does not inhere within objects and agents, per se, but in the uncertainty, the violation potentiated in their discategoricity. In this regard, Monleon's interpretation of Todorov echoes contemporary theorists of the horror genre. One such is Noel Carroll, who identifies horror not only with monsters who are grotesque, who transect and disrupt traditional categories, but also with the "curiosity" felt by readers and viewers to make sense of this categorical violation (Carroll 182). The emotional impetus of this horror and of the fantastic is then to collapse disorder, to disassemble and reorder the unreason of these representations.

To put a term to this indeterminacy, one might be able to recognize the existence of Monleon's unreasoned Gothic as a categorical insolubility. To borrow from Carroll again, the

monstrous is not that which is merely threatening, merely problematic, merely antagonistic. The hallmark of the horrific instead is that which defies even such a definitive categorization. To approach the horrific, the Gothic, isn't merely to approach that which is an object of fear. The kind of fear which would be necessary to characterize a phenomenon as truly horrific would be that which derives its quality of fear from its very "wrongness." Such a notion of the horrific finds some backing in the enlightenment ideal itself. In the dream of an ordered world, in a culture which finds its sense of identity even within and through the application of reason, of order, would not the ability of an entity or representation to defy this categorization itself embody the terrifying par-excellence? In such an interpretation, the certainty of death or harm would not be horrific--the truly horrific would defy even the certainty of destruction.

While this is a useful way to imagine the relations between culture and literature as they evolved through the Gothic, what might these shifts in portrayal mean for the categories against which the horrific fantastic was written? If the horrific fantastic is a function, as Monleon argues, of unreason, then what is the character of this unreason, and how might it be deployed in addressing itself to the reasoned categoricities of the culture at large?

The Unreasoned as Grotesque

The grotesque offers a useful way of responding to this question. Edwards and Graulund characterize the grotesque as that aesthetic that emerges from the combination of contradictory elements, the bombastic and unexpected, the definitionally discategorical (Edwards and Graulund 16). Within a grotesque aesthetic, categories are pressed together to the breaking point, made to play unkindly with their peers, such that through a violation of order, disorder is able to express forms of truth about the violated categories in a manner unavailable to traditional expression. The grotesque is then an aesthetic of essential unreason, of disruption and fantasy,

even when those fantasies are essentially un-fantastic. Not only does the grotesque allow the expression of hidden figures of reason through deployment of unreason, but these expressions are often unavailable to a traditional aesthetic. By portraying the contradictions inherent within a culture, either ontologically or traditionally, the grotesque forces a reassessment of the relationship between these combinatorials (Edwards and Graulund 3). To formulate it neatly, the grotesque uses what is available and contradictory in order to express that which is true and unavailable.

A few words are justified here pursuant to the relationship between the grotesque and the wider culture. If the grotesque is that aesthetic which combines elements which fall outside traditional cultural schemes of what is allowed to be appended to what, where do these conceptions come from? Let's say we are discussing a classical representation of monstrosity--a werewolf perhaps. Analysis of this sort will be carried on in greater length below, but what is it about the two elements so combined--wolf and man--that disqualifies them from unity within our cultural scheme? The answer to this question is entirely contingent upon the cultural milieu into which these representations enter. They are, in other words, entirely conventional.

For example, although a cultural rule against human/animal hybridity exists within our knowledge-culture, it does not inhere everywhere. It is, in a phrase, conventional rather than axiomatic. In many cultures, historically and today, human/animal hybrids are believed to exist, are understood to exist in the same axiomatic sense mentioned above. To counter this notion by suggesting that we (that is, those of us in the intellectually industrialized Western World) "have it right" as regards the proper prescription as to what might might-not properly go together runs into another issue. This second problem is that such a notion fails to account for problematic combinatorialities that exist within our culture, but which our conventions of eliding particularity

for the sake of an easily generalizable "truth" have rendered as existing outside that conventionality. For example, documents legislating the proper use of animal tissues in human medical therapies have existed in the EU for at least a decade. However, because of our conventions for naming these processes and realities, and because of the localized knowledge-systems in which these ideas are stored and abstracted, we are able to keep from running up against any cultural rule against hybridity which might render such medical processes grotesque.The grotesque is therefore the terminology I will use here to describe those images which directly contradict only culturally prevalent and not absolute notions of proper combinatoriality.

This aside opens up space for another discussion: are representations of the grotesque limited to agents or monsters in the traditional sense, or are such threatening combinatorialities capable of existing disarticulated from agentive representation? That is, although two elements which ought not go together are easily combined within a single agent, a single image, is this the only place they may combine? Going briefly back to our theoretical overview, if we are to take as a representative of the categorical violation our terminology *grotesque*, and if monstrosity would seem to emerge when this grotesquery is put into combination with an air of threat, where might this combination--problematic combination and threat--inhere in our culture outside traditional representations of horror imagery?

If the characteristics that define a horror monster are disarticulated from agents and are allowed to be identified within the culture at large, then horror quickly becomes something more complex and less encapsulable. Philosopher George Sieg describes such a possibility in his work "Infinite Regress." According to such a disarticulation, horror as a psychological experience of threatening combinatoriality is synonymous with its very possibility. That is, the very idea that

there is something unpredictably and unknowably "horrific" out there is itself experienced as horrific. As such, Sieg argues, horror has a self-compounding quality unique among aesthetic experiences. If we are to accept such a theory, it would mean that the grotesque, and horror by extension, are best imagined as the very awareness of the possibility of themselves. While it may be easiest to identify the grotesquery or horror of a specific agent, nameable monster, the experience of the grotesque or horrific is not strictly limited to artistic representations, but instead may inhere in our experience of reality, including our sociohistorical reality.

The grotesque, in its more limited aesthetic sense, has been used in the past as a means of understanding the output of the Gothic era, but not extensively. Novak has used the Grotesque as a means of illuminating the contrast between Gothic and the sublime. While the sublime, similarly to the grotesque, trucks in the expression of that which is inexpressible through what resources are available, the grotesque differs qualitatively in the kinds of emotions thus revealed. If the grotesque leads to a sublimity, it's within a negative sublime, where disorder and disruption are experienced as a concealed truth (Novak 59). The ineffable bucolic then becomes something more akin to a desolate revelation, and traditional, mundane beauty must be negated through defilement and disruption in order to reveal concealed aesthetic truths. Bakhtin's treatment of the carnivalesque may also be seen as a kind of grotesque, though not overtly (10), although he does notably address theories of the grotesque as expressed on bodies later in the same work (303). Through the inversion of traditioned orders, the grotesque may argue, the truth of those orders is revealed and reinforced. The violation, the transgression, the unreason, provides the backdrop against which such inversion is capable of expressing what traditional aesthetics are not. The crowned jester is made grotesque, and through this grotesquery we question the epistemic domains of clown and crown, so to speak.

There have been variable explorations of the grotesque which have emphasized different elements of these representation. While the approach I've chosen emphasizes the contradictory elements of grotesque representation, other theorists have indicated that through its historical usage, the grotesque has come to be usable to describe anything from a two-headed toad to a Higher Truth (Harpham, 467). Other theorists have emphasized the role of the comic or the absurd in tempering grotesque representations, even going so far as to indicate that this absurdity--a gentle neutering of threat--is a necessary requisite to the existence of a grotesque representation (Stieg, 258). I have adopted the more simplified, non-synthetic interpretation of the concept here in order to emphasize what I believe to be its most essential element: the combination within an aesthetic of two elements which do not belong together in order to accomplish an objective otherwise unavailable. In this way, the grotesque bears a passing resemblance to the sublime, an aesthetic tradition with an analogous history of divergent interpretation, a resemblance which other theorists have noted (Chao). As I said, I will stand by a more streamlined definition for ease of use, but it bears being said that other theorists have variously complexified this relatively simple super-structure.

What new relations might be revealed if we bring together Monleon's diachronic treatment of fantastic fiction and Edwards and Graulund's treatment of the grotesque? Each of the movements through which Monleon's theory passes becomes a different site for imagining an operation of the grotesque. From the earliest stages of the Monleon's Gothic, monstrosity is situated on the outskirts of society, cloaked in age and decrepitude. The *Castle of Otranto* is the example he gives. The grotesquery at work in such portrayals, the categorical contradiction, emerges at the uncomfortable suture between past and present. What is monstrous in these portrayals is the coming together of progress and history in disharmony, and a grotesque reading

would demand a questioning of the categoricity of each of these domains. If the past and present collide violently, horrifically, what is it in their natures which demands such a violent response? Monleon's contention would be that these collisions exemplify a conflict between old social orders and emergent enlightenment ideals (32). The enlightenment, through seeking an absolute capture through the rejection of dis-order, un-reason, jettisons the past as inherently dangerous and retrograde. This changes during the middle and late Gothic. In these works, monstrosity, and so the foundations for the grotesque, are resituated as emerging from within the social body. No longer are monsters on the outskirts--they're in the house. The grotesque within the mid-Victorian era, during the age of gothic production after the turn of the Nineteenth century, constitutes a nightmare of enlightenment. If the Enlightenment's capture can't exorcise the demons of grotesquery, they must emerge from the premises of the enlightenment impulse itself.

If the originary agents of unreason, as explored by Monleon, are those who fell through the cracks of ordering impulses of the industrializing age, how might a grotesque theorizing of their status illuminate the qualities according to which they find themselves in conflict with the culture which created them? What descriptors do these people possess which transforms them into inherent contradictions? They obviously are not monstrous in any traditional understanding of the word. They possess an identifiable humanity, agency, bodies, names. This very fact of their humanity, however, may be of of the two elements of their identity which finds itself in conflict within a grotesque interpretation. If one element of their grotesquery is their humanity, what might find itself in inherent contradiction with their status as human? The answer to this question is their very defiance of the systems of human-subjectivizing which was the bar-for-entry for humanity during an era when humanity was identified with industry. They are human--body, mind, soul. They are inhuman--economically useless, lacking ability to contribute to the

social body. Within Monleon's interpretation of sociohistorical unreason, the grotesque person is no more or less than he or she who is useless.

Some Instances of the Grotesque

While this interpretation of unreason as an operation of the grotesque has a degree of intuitive appeal, an illustration may be necessary to see how this relation has persisted through works of the gothic and horrific fiction during the time period about which Monleon wrote. The purpose of the following will be to track this evolutionary movement within the changing premises of the Gothic through three works of mid-to-late Gothic fiction. The works which have been selected for this task were picked for their varying representation for the origins of monstrosity: from within, from space between, and from without. Each of the works considered here fall within the purview of industrialized Gothicism as identified by Monleon--however, because he only considers a single one of these works within his treatment, the variability of the ways in which monstrosity– grotesquery– expressed itself is left ambiguous.

Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, published anonymously in 1818, is the exemplar Monleon uses to explore the industrialized Gothic, citing the emergence of monstrosity from within the premises of normativity. Victor Frankenstein does not encounter monstrosity on the outskirts, but instead becomes the architect of a more localized rarefaction. Within this work, Frankenstein does not discover the monster within a periphery, or even have its reality foist upon him. Rather, he creates this representation of the monstrous. The ease with which modern readers and commentators collapse man and monster--each of whom is commonly referred to as "Frankenstein"--is itself a small testament to the identification between monster and man, unreason and reason

To apply a grotesque interpretation to this monstrosity would begin with the question, what is thrown into conflict? Where does discategoricity inhere? In the case of Frankenstein's monster, an obvious answer might be the union of medicalized death and medicalized life. With industrialization in Europe came the industrialization of medicality, a perception of the body as machine. This dual expression of human nature, as both machine and mind, agent and automaton, can be seen as a manifestation of monstrosity, pointing to a contradiction seated within the heart of what it is to be thinking flesh. This is a perspective popularized lately by modern Gothic author Thomas Ligotti. To his approach, life itself becomes grotesque in its collapse of agent and non-agent. Once minds may become untethered from bodies, how does one differentiate herself from the nameless monster's Grotesque conceptual collapse?

This theme of monstrous locationality is not limited to ontologically impossible agents. Wuthering Heights was published in 1847, only a year before Emily Bronte--who published the work under a pseudonym--passed away. For all this work's passage through time, its locale is oppressively isolated. Shuttling essentially between two locations, two estates estranged by the eerie moors, this story is a primer in the ability to create sensations of distance and isolation within locality. The story's characters, confusing as they do an internalistic respectability and alienating otherness, become monstrous even as they participate in tropes located at the heart of standard Victorian fare. In fact, they could not be monstrous if they were not at once so familiar.

The grotesquery portrayed in Wuthering Heights is a bit more difficult to locate, situated as it is within a concatenation of foreignness and locality--Heathcliff's foreign birth and adoption makes him an agentive contradiction, a Weird character in the sense used by Mark Fisher, as a union of two elements that simply do not go together--his presence evokes an indefinable unease. This work also participates in Fisher's theory of the Eerie, the presence or absence of that which

should or should not be so. Geoffrey Harpham has argued that the grotesque functions most effectively when the world into which it enters is largely normative. The creation of the eerie seems to suggest this same necessity--how can abnormality be portrayed, how can unreason be outlined, without the backdrop of reasonable expectation? Heathcliff does not simply become a monstrous outsider--he is situated as a consummate insider, though grotesquely so. He is landed, and his situation within the novel suggests an inversion, a perversion of the function normally reserved for a normative character.

Bram Stoker's Dracula, published in 1897, continues the trend toward portrayals of localized externality, though in a two-handed fashion; while the story begins in a locale reminiscent of Monleon's pre-Industrial Gothic, all drooping cobwebs and eclectic castles, these representations then invade Jonathan Harker's normalized world. As Dracula moves into London, he brings corruption with him, not only as a material reality, but as a conversion experience. He is not simply an agent of unreason, but a disseminator of abnormality. Even the fixtures with which he arrives on Western shores indicate this nature--wolves, bats, and rats all harken his arrival, as though the plague-infested old-world had come to despoil a modern age.

Count Dracula's categorical grotesqueries are quite standard for the horror genre, uniting as he does notions of consumption and sexuality, death and life, foreignness and immanence. One way in which this representation differs, however, is in the capacity of this externality to pollute. Dracula's curse and so the primary signifier of his ontologically foreign nature, spreads to others, invades and converts the local to this radical outsider status. To illuminate this move, Kristeva's formulation of the abject appears early through imagery that is grotesque with reference to normal bodies--filth, waste, dung, spasm, vomiting (2). These effects don't simply exist as additional objects, as the monstrosity of Dracula couldn't simply exist as another

Western subject. The grotesque abject threatens to collapse those systems of order into which it irrupts, a conversion of reason to unreason, an unholy collapse.

What then do these representations have in common? Is it possible to come to any conclusion regarding the grotesque representations of these novels within their historical context? While it's difficult to draw any sweeping conclusions from such a small set, it does seem to be the case that these works carry out Monleon's assertion as to the particular nature of Industrial Gothic. In each of these stories, on contrast to pre-Industrial Gothicism, the monstrous representations seem to spill into, to merge with the normalized social body. In contrast to preceding Gothic forms, where the story was either situated in or projected back into an exotic world, often alienated in both time and space, these works bring the monstrous home, so to speak, seeming to collapse and complicate notions of internal and external.

What of this collapse as a grotesque representation? If the incongruous categories brought into conflict to constitute the Industrial Gothic are internality and externality, a grotesque aesthetic interpretation would ask the question, what of these categories? Is the very possibility of their unity a suggestion of their mutability? In his work on monstrosity, anthropologist David Gilmore has suggested that cultures permit monsters to transgress culturally cherished boundaries in order to exemplify concepts of threat. From this vantage point, it would seem to be the case that this concept of internality is just such a cherished boundary. Drawing from Mary Douglas's work, particularly *Purity and Danger*, Gilmore has suggested that such portrayals and stories of transgression serve a reaffirming role, function as a ritual impurity which, through banishment, reinforces such categories as internal/external, foreign/local. Representations of the Grotesque then become sites simultaneously for questioning the categorical limitations of boundary and for reaffirming the stability of these demarcations.

Chapter 3: Horrific Assumptions and Horrific Effect

The previous chapter has been devoted to identifying unreason as instantiation of a grotesque aesthetic, as well as how this conceptualization allows us to imagine horrific representations as embodying contradictions within the social body. The question remains: how do audiences approach this contradiction? How is such contradiction activated within audiences? This chapter will then be devoted to understanding the two-step operation of audience presupposition, its reliance upon audience knowledge. Within this operation, I will also explore the potential opened for critical effect, the possibility of breaking away from the reactionary architectures of the monstrous as cultural contradiction.

Two-Act Horror and the Possibility of Effect

Historically, the horror genre tends to be reactionary, overdetermined, and defined by a relationship to its subject matter that leaves little space for rhetorical mobility. Horror is a space of what Mikhail Bakhtin refers to as the "carnivalesque," a place in which violation is allowed because it is to be *quashed* (5-8). In many ways, the history of the horror genre is a history of reactionary politics, profoundly conservative morality, and an almost obsessive fixation on normativity. If horror can be thought of as a genre of "ritual defilement," then the reason it is tolerable--and even enjoyable, for some--is because it holds out the potential for a return to normalcy. This return is almost always a reaffirmation of what is "real" or "normative," a repudiation of the abnormality which constitutes horrific antagonism. Not only are the objects which populate horror narrative surprisingly consistent through its history, but so too are the narrative reactions to it. Vampires, hauntings, possessions have been treated overwhelmingly similarly since the beginning of the horror genre as follows: the choice is destruction or integration.

The kinds of recurring objects which populate the genre may be, however, the source of its critical potential. The reason for the special power the horror genre possesses is its making of statements with ontological impact--horror makes claims about reality via presentation of unreality, and it makes value judgments about those statements. Carroll makes a distinction between the kinds of statements made by horror and other thriller genres. According to *Paradoxes of the Heart*, his theoretical analysis of art-horror, Carroll claims horror possesses a specialized status as a genre in part because it does not simply make statements about *what is not*, as any fictionalized narrative does, but instead makes statements about *what cannot possibly be* (16). This distinction is accompanied within art-horror by a particular protagonistic orientation toward the objects of these statements: the emotion of fear. This is what sets horror apart from mere fantasy. Historian Farah Mendlesohn identifies the general class of fantasy to which horror belongs, the intrusion fantasy, in which unreality or impossibility presses itself forcibly into a widely normative world (115). However, to take Carroll's framework, these unreal objects are not sufficient unto themselves to define a narrative as horrific--there must also be a judgment, or a specific and evaluative emotional response (16-17).

An issue in this line of argument presents itself. Critics have sometimes addressed the question as to whether or not horror is even capable of articulating ideological or social critique. After all, if the statements horror makes are about things not found in any reality, and if the judgments it makes about these statements are almost uniformly normative, then can it be claimed that such statements are capable of affecting an audience's notions of normalcy and response? Horror theorist Noel Carroll would, problematically, respond in the negative to this question. He would state that the horror genre is neutered in terms of its potential for social critique by the same component that gives it distinction. Because the horror genre makes

judgments about statements that "cannot possibly be,"--i.e. wolf-men, vampires, ghostly dolls--these judgments are about nothing at all (199-201). After all, what does it matter if I say that ghostly dolls are threateningly grotesque and should be destroyed? A ghostly doll has never run for congress, and I'm not likely to encounter any such ontological aberration in my own life.

One issue with Carroll's response is that, as mentioned in Chapter 1, the cultural categories on which his distinction rests are significantly more culture-bound than he admits in his treatment. While haunted dolls do not exist in our culture, they may *exist* in another culture. Conversely, things which we may claim objectively exist within our culture may be in the realm of fantasy for another. Almost any modern form of technology would seem supernatural to anyone alive fifty years ago, and to many people who still live in largely pre-technological cultures. Carroll's claim that the judgments of art-horror are neutered by the ontological categories to which the judged objects/statements belong is undercut by the socially constructed nature of these categories. He neatly bypasses this issue by labeling works which truck in horrific effect without ontic violation "thrillers," a distinction which he acknowledges as arbitrary, but the line must be somewhere, right?

Still other theorists have sidestepped this issue of unreality entirely and claimed that it is instead horror's unique relationship with themes of existentialism and ontological discombobulation which make it a prime site for this kind of cultural understanding. Philosopher Stuart Hanscomb claims existential theory can be understood as horrific, or that our understanding of an existential perspective can be enhanced by an understanding of how horror operates, given the tendency of each subject to dramatize and destabilize our relationship with reality and our place within it (1-6). Philosopher Eugene Thacker has gone even further in this direction, and argues in *In the Dust of this Planet* that horror is itself an existential tool for

coming to terms with the idea of a "world without-us" (8-9). To both of these theorists, horror is seen as existentially *therapeutic*, given the emotions or worldview embedded within its treatment of violation.

The modern horror genre has at times attempted to bear out the optimistic perspective as to horror's potency for cultural effect. Contemporary horror has demonstrated a powerful interest in and potential for social impact, with such films as *Get Out* drawing massive crowds while simultaneously using the horror space to generate social critique. In *Get Out*, a black man is brought to meet his white girlfriend's family on their palatial estate. It's only after he arrives that he realizes something dreadful is afoot, and he narrowly escapes losing his mind—quite literally--to the twisted desires of the whitewashed antagonists. His unawares manipulation by the white characters of the film then mirrors the subtle and not-so-subtle manipulation African-Americans may experience in normative White culture at large. Here the horror genre can be understood as using audience understanding of one form of manipulation in order to illuminate the other.

This use of audience knowledge to leverage effect is not new. Historically, horror has repeatedly used the expectations which come with its labelling to address itself directly to the ideology of its audiences. The horror genre has always been powerfully intertextual, and has frequently drawn on what rhetorician James Porter refers to as "presupposition" for comprehensibility (35-36). That is, horror often makes demands on the audience to bring certain forms of knowledge, genre-keyed understanding, to their experience of art-horror. Audiences who fail to bring this knowledge are often left out of the full modern horror experience, particularly in contemporary examples from the genre, when the conventions and operations of horror narrative themselves become objects of address. The rigorous intertextuality of much modern horror nearly demands an audience schooled in horror convention. Who will live? Who

will die? Where will the ghoul strike next? It is the suite of answers to such questions that form a substrate of generic expectation out of which much contemporary horror story operates.

Presupposition doesn't only operate on the level of meta-narrativity, however. Because horror is a genre of specific audience response, generally fear, it often relies on violation of audience expectation in order to function. A natural question is how this can occur in a genre seemingly so reactionary and entrenched in tradition. If horror relies on violational statements for effect, how can such violation occur within such a small selection of tropes? There are two responses to this, both of which answer this conundrum by pointing to changes within the horror genre itself. These two forms of change could be termed *inter-generic* and *intra-generic*. The former is that which occurs when one genre begins spill into another, as when a film promises romance only to subvert the audience's romantic expectation with horrific effect. The latter is that which occurs when an element within the genre itself shifts or *intensifies*, as when each new iteration of a horror franchise ups the ante in terms of blood, guts, or effects. In either case, horror relies on a great deal of presuppositional knowledge in its audiences in order to function properly. This wealth of knowledge, as I will show, serves as the jumping off point for horror's possible effects.

Horror then operates by presenting the audience with a statement in the form of a horrific presentation, then judges this statement and disposes of it accordingly. Not only this, but horror also relies on the audience's expectations for what kinds of statements constitute this horrific class and what kinds of judgment are appropriate thereto. This one-two generic punch has been imagined by numerous theorists to be a site of social impact.

The Rhetorical Maneuver and Horrific Criticality

In further understanding the play between expectation and delivery, and how this play may become a site for critical effect, it may be useful to step for a moment into rhetorical territory. Kendall Phillips articulated what he referred to as the "rhetorical maneuver" in order to resolve what he saw as an inherent tension within postmodern notions of subjectivity. According to Phillips, postmodernism motivated a replacement of traditional notions of personal identity with a new idea of subjectivity. Within this framework, identity is simultaneously fluid and multiple, while at the same time determined by context and social disciplinarity (310-312). In order to account for this dual-nature of fluidity and overdetermination, Phillips devised the rhetorical maneuver to describe the space which opens between determination and deployment within the operation of subjectivity. He posits the instance of identity as a specific, context-bound "position," into which a subjectivity is performed as "form" (312-317). Position is then the situational space for identity to occupy, say as a teacher or student, while form is the specific performance within that space which may or may not cohere with the expected performance. The rhetorical maneuver, as Phillips describes it, occurs when an individual deploys a form not appropriate to the social position specified by context (317-318). As, to use his example, when a student deploys the form of "new father" in order to request additional time on a school assignment. He has stepped outside the expected student position, and subverted expectation by delivering a subject form of "new father."

In order to understand how the rhetorical maneuver can be applied to genre deployment, it's necessary to understand the structure of subjectivity as portrayed by Phillips as a dialectic of expectation and delivery. The maneuver occurs in time. He characterizes that which precedes the form of deployment, the position, as something which temporally precedes the deployed form of

the subjective performance (Phillips 319-320). Put another way, Phillips' rhetorical maneuver assumes presupposition on the part of the audience and rhetorically subverts this expectation to bring about a specific effect. In the case of Phillips' example, this is more time on an assignment. In the case of the horror genre, it is possibility of critical effect in the audience.

If subjectivity is seen as a kind of per-*form*-ance within an expected position, then the horror genre, as its own kind of performance, can be seen as responding to the disciplinarity of audience requirements to possess the label *horror*--genre, to borrow a term, must be hailed as such. In other words, both subjectivity and genre are best understood as dynamics of expectation and delivery along disciplinary lines. If this is so, the horror genre is a specialized kind of genre-subject which is defined by its self-conscious adherence the expectations which precede it. A horrific genre-subjectivity would be one which is defined by its insistence on always delivering on audience expectation in a two-part performance: horrific statement and narratorial judgment.

If we allow the preceding use of Phillips' framework to understand performance broadly, we have opened up a new means of understanding not only the violational operation of the horror genre, but violation more broadly. By making this turn, we are enabled to see Phillips' rhetorical maneuver as a means of conceptualizing transgressive expression generally within spaces of determined expectation, and horror as only a specialized instance of this possibility. In this framework, a transgressive communication would be any whose form deviates from the expectational position which precedes it. The horror genre is distinguished in this case by the fact that it makes statements not only about it's narratorial objects, but concerns these objects with violation of what is considered possible.

Genre theory can also be used to understand this transition. Rhetorician Carolyn Miller's concept of genre as structuration within rhetorical community can be imagined as the position

within which a genre piece's form is deployed (70-71). In Miller's theory, genre is the reproducible network of communicative elements which have become traditionalized within a culture for creating particular effects. Almost like brain-synapses, these tradition-worn pathways of expression constitute the call which specific pieces of communication answer, and so are made comprehensible (71-72). If one imagines this illustration overlaid on the position vs. form contrast which Phillips specifies, the distinction between *recognizable-as* and possible, real-world *expression-of* would become the space between Phillips' position and form.

The horror genre is in no way privileged in the ways in which it can be understood through this specific lens of expectation and delivery. That said, while it is not privileged in being able to be understood in these terms, it is interesting as a genre which specifically concerns itself with violations of *what is possible*, in Carroll's terms. In this way, it bears a certain resemblance to the avant-garde. Similarly to the problems briefly mentioned above, theoretician Thomas Docherty describes in his introduction to *Postmodernism: A Reader* the problem inherent in a genre/form which relies upon violation of expectation for its effect (14-16). If the avant-garde is always violational, is it violational at all? Isn't this perpetual expectation for violation a kind of stability which presses up against the avant-garde's raison d'etre--to always violate? More significantly, how does this problem compare with the problem of horror, which must always frighten through means of ontological violation?

The difference between the problem of horror and the problem of the avant-garde is to be found in the distinction between where violation is found in each. While the avant-garde may find its violation in the whole of its structure, from form to subject to presentation, horror benefits from controlling its variable surrounding the ontological irruption as much as possible. When Mendlesohn cites the horror genre as belonging to the super-genre of intrusive fantasy, she

makes an important observation: what intrudes is only considered an intrusion because it enters a normative world, though, she concedes, this normative world need not be our own (114). While the avant-garde always a delivers an experience which subverts expectations, horror delivers an experience which delivers upon expectation enough to establish the world as normative, only then delivering an ontologically violational element.

An illustrative counterexample may be useful. The popular podcast *Welcome to Night Vale* takes the form of old-timey local radio show piped in from the small desert town of Night Vale. It's describable as a Lovecraftian take on *The News from Lake Wobegon*, complete with descriptions of unexplainable deaths, monstrosities in the bowling alley, and a member of the PTA who is a sentient, psychic, glowing cloud of ectoplasm. While all these come off as horrific, particularly considering the penchant for the program to trade in sudden deaths, it never becomes something describable as belonging to the horror genre. The reason for this is the lack of normativity into which the events in the program enter. While the program's narrative is horrific as contrasted with our world, it is not horrific within the world of Night Vale. In fact, this lack of narrative horror at the deeply disturbing events in the town are the source of its comic tone. Yes, a pterodactyl materialized during the high school pep-rally, killing 7, but these things happen.

This kind of unbounded strangeness, while upsetting, fails to be horrific because the horror experience remains unbounded. That is, there is no way to gain a firm footing within the narrative world of the podcast according to which one might discern what is truly aberrant within the world and what is not. Media theorist Isabel Pinedo identifies this "boundedness" as one of the defining characteristics of the horror genre, both within its modern and historical horror iterations (20). It wouldn't be absurd to refer to a narrative like that in *Welcome to Night Vale* as avant-garde, or at least it's far more likely to answer to that label than horror, at least according

to the categorical definition used by Mendlesohn. Horror then avoids the avant-garde stumbling block of a perpetual horizon of violation by grounding its transgressions in a system of normativity that always allows a contrast between that which is normative and that which is not.

The Critical Possibilities of Horror

I've described above a specific way of understanding the systems of expectation and delivery within genre generally and the horror genre specifically, using Phillips' rhetorical maneuver as a tool to illustrate the space between expectation and delivery. The question which presents itself now is, "So what?" What does this model allow us to understand about the horror genre, and what does this maneuver allow to be accomplished within the horror genre specifically?

The reason this work addresses itself to the horror genre is for the special types of effects which are enabled through transgressive communication in a genre which makes overt value judgments on ontological and ideological violations. In other words, the horror genre is capable of performing unique social action by virtue of the fact that art-horror narrative, as described in the first section of the paper, operates in two stages: First, the art horror artifact presents an object or performance which is explicitly violational. Second, the narrative/piece responds to this non-normativity through the story's transition to its second act, entailing a repudiation or putting-down of the horrific elements the narrative presents. Or, at least, this is how art horror has traditionally operated. A number of contemporary strains of the genre, those which engage in the kind of potentiated maneuvering I've described, leave off or leave incomplete the second phase of this structure, resulting in a presentation of a horrific or violational statement which is not then resolved.

A metaphorical description of this process may be useful in order to illuminate the call/response structure of traditional horror. In understanding horror as a kind of ritualized movement into impurity, what anthropologist Mary Douglas has described in *Purity and Danger*, we can imagine the horror genre raising the blinds on the structure of our categoricity, giving is a brief glimpse of the discategorical chaos outside (Douglas 7-9). This chaos is not simply one side of the cultural category of orderedness, but is instead the non-categorizable space of pre-semiotic *urstoff*, what Paul Santilli in his treatment of horror and evil describes as a manifestation of what Kearney called the *chora,* resembling the *abject*--that which precedes the linguistic symbolic order, in philosopher Julia Kristeva's sense, whose work Santilli sites in locating this boundary (Santilli 175-176). This showing, this raising of the blind, is the first act of the horror performance. The second, traditionally, has been the closing of this blind, the lowering of the shade. One can imagine the classical horror artist saying, "See? Thank goodness we're safe from such chaos." In much postmodern horror, however, which maneuvers within the audience's expectations, the blind is not lowered. The window is left open and we're left to, at best, imagine to ourselves that the raising itself was mere fictionalization--we're relegated to using the boundedness of the experience as a stop-gap for resolution the narrative failed to provide. This failure to close what's been opened is what Pinedo identifies as one of the hallmarks of postmodern horror narratives, typified by a cultural tendency away from stability and comfortable dualities (24-25).

This temporal operation of horror in stages can be understood as a manifestation of traditional narrative structure. Like any classic story genre, horror functions in three stages: equilibrium, disequilibrium, new equilibrium. Unlike other genres, however, the stage of disequilibrium within the horror genre does not simply function by showing an undesirable

challenge or task to be faced, but what constitutes existential threat through its illustration of a state of affairs *which cannot be*. What faces the protagonist within a science fiction novel or a fantasy novel may be something with which she is not familiar, something which requires a new paradigm in order to understand, but the horror genre is characterized by the status of these challenges as essentially, ontologically threatening. While a science fictional monster may be filed away and dismissed as merely existing outside of, though imaginable to, the categories of the protagonist, the horror monster instead threatens a rupture of this categoricity itself.

It is this first-act presentation phase of the horror narrative that Julia Kristeva refers to as the abject, that which defies human attempts at categoricity by drawing attention to the very constructed-ness of the system wherein it is impossible (1-3). The horror monster, the object of emotive horror, is not merely frightening or threatening to life and limb: its threat operates at a far more fundamental level. Santilli claims that this emotion is not reducible to mere dread or terror, but is instead something more fundamental and cognitive (177). In fact, Carroll states that this essential, ontological violation is the very source of the horror genre's appeal. In his "curiosity theory," Carroll claims that the human need to properly categorize, to order and systematize, is itself the origin of our love for horror (180-182). The horror we feel as emotion is, although by no means identical, ontologically coterminous with the fascination we feel in the face of the horror genre. Both our interest and our horror originate not in the categorical threat or corruption of the horror object, but its very non-categoricity.

But what if a specific kind of maneuver is performed against the audience's expectation of closure? What if, instead of the above-mentioned ontic curtain being closed, it's left wide open, or the ideology of the narrative hero is left wounded by the appearance of this categorically transgressive display? Horror as a set of formal attributes and as a specific kind of audience

response is predicated on the closure of the first act, the repudiation of what's been presented. The window is closed, the categories are restored, the story ends. Presumably, the curiosity of the audience has been sated, and the existential terror of the protagonist has been resolved. But what if this doesn't occur? What happens in the case of Pinedo's postmodern horror? What happens if the form of the horror deployment is a maneuvered mismatch to the expected position?

The response to this is troubling. In *Gender Trouble*, theorist Judith Butler uses that title-phrase to describe acts that don't simple transgress boundaries of acceptable gender performance, but instead draw attention again to the constructed-ness of these boundaries (xxix-xxxi). Rather than simply being troublesome, these acts trouble categoricity itself--they are the abject as agent of ideological shift. These kinds of acts bear a sort of family resemblance to the operation of the horror genre. Drag shows, the example Butler uses in the introduction to her work, function by showing what is categorically troubling: a man who is woman, a woman who is a man. This troubling occurs simultaneously in two ways. In the first, the female appearance of the drag outfit seems to declare a mismatch with the male interior. In the second, the male appearance of the drag performer seems to declare a mismatch with what is taken to be a female, or not prohibitively masculine, interior (186-188). To draw an analogue to the horror genre, a drag show which attempted to adhere to the two-act structure typical of classical horror would end with each performer taking off their outfits and declaring, "Don't worry: I'm really a man!" or worse, with the audience doing the same. Obviously, this does not happen, and the discategoricity of non-resolution forms the foreground of the performance itself. The fact of non-resolution, of things not being put back "as they should be" to match a normative ontology,

constitutes the troubling potential of these performances. Here, discategoricity is a source of powerful social potential.

What I'd like to claim here is that the horror genre, when it employs the transgressive performance of the 'generic maneuver,' gains the potential to perform a kind of 'trouble' on the categoricity of the artistic objects, and perhaps too on the audience who are called upon to relate to the story's protagonists. The possibility for this kind of narrative troubling potentiated in the non-closure of the horror performance is to be located in what Carroll identifies as a necessary element within the horror experience: audience alignment (88-96). It is not enough in a horror narrative to have a categorically violational element--it must also be reacted to in a certain way by the story's normative world, generally the protagonist, and the audience must share this alignment. In other words, the audience and the protagonist must share the same opinion or perspective on the horror objects in the art piece in order for it to constitute an example of the horror genre. If this sympathy is not present, the art-horror will have been a failure, or will no longer be describable as horror as such.

Another concept from Carroll that might be useful in understanding this movement, as well as the role of sympathy in imagining possible effects of the horror genre, is that of the distinction between *believing* and *entertaining* (79-80) The problem with emotive responses to the horror genre, according to Carroll, is that it simultaneously requires sufficient audience buy-in to elicit an emotional response, a buy-in which would seem to require a tacit audience belief in the images and statements provided, while also being a contained, artistic, fictionalized. To frame this problem as a question, how can an audience respond emotively, viscerally, to what they believe to be not only a fiction, but a fiction characterized by its very impossibility? If the origin of the emotion or horror is a kind of epistemological troubling, how can this emotion

coexist with my conscious understanding of the fact that the scenes and objects presented in the film are fictional? The answer, according to Carroll, can't simply lie in a two-stage belief/refutation process, whereby the audience first believes the monster is real, only to consciously banish this belief (83). The reason for this is that, if the audience believed for even a moment that a horror monster, let's say half-lobster/half-man, were real, they would immediately run screaming from the theater, not merely jump in their seats. The solution Carroll finds to this quandary is in the distinction between true belief and simply *entertaining* an idea. To entertain an idea is, for Carroll, to emulate or simulate true belief, or to imagine oneself affected by their adoption, without truly accepting these objects, such as man/lobster hybrids, as factual entities.

So, it is not the case that the audience now believes in a world in which the categories transgressed by this film remain broken or disrupted, but it may be the case that they may now be able to entertain a world in which they have remained disrupted, and too entertain the possibility of this continued disruption as a kind of equilibrium itself. To return to the possible effect of this idea-entertaining on the equilibrium-centric structure of the narrative, if the audience is able to entertain the idea of a world in which the horror monster is, for example, not truly evil, but instead an ally in disguise, this idea-entertaining may be allowed to work on the same plane of abstraction as the categoricity the horror objects of the narrative occupy. In other words, assuming the notion of idea-entertaining to be conceptually sound, and assuming that the audience has opened a suspended space in themselves where fictional assertions are allowed to have emotional or abstract effects, a maneuvering away from audience expectation may be able to affect an impact in terms of the expectant categories according to which horror narrative is comprehensible.

In order to discern what this kind of maneuver might mean, it would require working something out which hasn't been treated here: precisely what it might entail to *entertain* a notion. One imaginable benefit of the fantasy genres is that allows us to imagine possible worlds, and this mode of imagination might be close to what Carroll has in mind when he talks about the potentialized state the horror genre takes advantage of for effect. The question of what impact specifically the imagining of an alternative world is capable of creating in an audience is one far too vast to be explored here. It is almost a truism, however, that the experience, even in fictionalized form, of a world which has hitherto been conceived as impossible will have the impact of expanding an audience's sense of what is *conceivable* in the world. In other words, although fiction will likely not change the audience's notion of what the world is, it will necessarily impact their conception of what worlds are imaginable. This seems a decent enough first step in conceptualizing a space for horror fiction's critical effects.

Chapter 4: Theorizing *Night of the Living Dead*

From more general theorization, let's turn to specific instance in the history of the contemporary horror genre, The *Night of the Living Dead*, by George A. Romero. In this chapter, I will explore the operation of both intertextual presupposition and of the sociohistorical operation of monstrous "unreason" as they demonstrate themselves within this film. I've chosen this film as my artifact both for its popularity and influence--it essentially began the modern dispensation of zombie narratives--and for the rich suite of cultural background from which it emerged. I will begin with a general discussion of the film's historical and social background before moving into a more detailed account of its two-act structure, typical of the horror genre generally.

Background of the Living Dead, Personal and Social

In this film, a group of survivors hole up in a small home in Pennsylvania while a zombie outbreak, suggested to be alien in origin, causes the buried and unburied dead to rise back to life. The zombies must feed, and the survivors hold off against a siege of hungry and decaying shambling figures, succumbing to the horde one-by-one. Eventually, only one of the survivors-- Ben--is left. As the outbreak seems to be subsiding, he tentatively emerges from their stronghold, only to be shot dead by a group of local militia-men, who ostensibly mistook him for a zombie. The film drew attention at the time of its release for its casting decision to make Ben black, a near first in American genre films.

The *Night of the Living Dead* was released at the apex of the Vietnam War, a year before the Vietnamization of the conflict, which transferred the burden of maintaining the war's progress to the natives of the nation combined with a troop withdrawal. Even while the film was derided for its portrayals of graphic and lingering violence, audiences for this film were also

inundated with unprecedented imagery of the violence in the East, with up-to-the-minute coverage of village-burnings and napalm-bombings forcing Americans to confront the incomprehensible violence in which they were implicated. The hordes of men who returned from Vietnam shambled back into American consciousness as walking contradictions, simultaneously participating in the narratives of heroism constructed around military service, even while their performed violence and incumbent failure had been telecast into the minds of the American public.

In combination with the ongoing conflict in Vietnam, the Cold War raged on, with hostilities continuing to compound with the Red Threat, who were perceived as a non-rational hivemind, bent on the proliferation of their collectivist ideology. If the violence we performed was monstrous, the repercussions of a failure to act would be too dire to consider. The now cliched "better red than dead" sloganeering of this era is a testament to the degree to which Americans perceived a fall to the red menace not so much as the conclusive military obliteration of previous wars, but as a more ambiguous loss of self, a collapse into a collectivity that threatened the individuality promised by the American project.

From the perspective of the sociocultural/grotesque, this combination of factors strongly contributed to situation in which the threatening actors in the society, the scions of unreason, were both those who, in Monloen's model, were unable to contribute to the American industrial project, as well as those foreign agents who were not simply failing to contribute to the Western rationalist objective, but were embodying its antithesis in the form of the Communist project. The men who returned from Vietnam emerged as broken humans, victims of an effacement agency which robbed them of the ability to become one with the American vision of collective individuality. With us but still "over there," they constituted a grim reflection of our Western

vision. The Communists too presented an image of inverted collectivity, a sort of hypertrophy of American industrialism. Into such a cultural current *Night of the Living Dead* entered.

George A. Romero himself participated in a conflicted upbringing, simultaneously partaking of the Western project while estranged from it through the tension of immigration and integration. Romero's father considered himself a Spaniard, born of parents who lived in Cuba during its most successful years. George's father, also George, married a Lithuanian woman named Ann Dvorsky, and they had George, who claims he was raised in a household in which both Spanish and Lithuanian speech were verboten--it was to be only American English (Romero, xvi). They lived in a predominantly Italian neighborhood in which George Romero says he was called a "spic," and was often mistaken for being Puerto Rican, as "Latino" during that time was often shorthand for someone of Puerto Rican descent. This conflicted with George's father's hatred of this association, believing the Puerto Ricans to be turning New York into a sewer (Romero, xvii). This dialectic of integration and friction formed the backdrop to George A. Romero's later generativity, his portrayals of unity and division.

From the perspective of Monleon's sociohistorical treatment, this attempted "coming into the social body" by Romero's family may be seen as a kind of invasion in the inverse, as immigrant populations were often themselves seen as harbingers of monstrous change within the reasoned communities of the "real" Americans. While this immigration, this integration, was seen as an essential quality of the American experience, it is impossible to avoid the contradictions inherent in a culture which simultaneously gloried in the acceptance into the social body anyone who wished to do so, and refused right to entry anyone who refused to cast off their history and participate in the project of integration. This has always been a distinctly

American concept, as in the injunction to "Kill the Indian, Save the Man" in the forced integration of Native American populations only a few decades prior.

As an aside, it bears mentioning that Monleon's treatment of the sociohistorical function of the Gothic restricts itself to European examples, and the American project differed somewhat. While, according to Monleon, the integration of unreasoned populations into the reasoned European body was an instance of conflict and tension, the American relationship with this process is a bit more fraught. While there has been a robust history of discrimination against immigrant populations in the United States, the US has also adopted a sort of fantasy theme surrounding the integration of these populations. Given this objective, the monstrosity of unreason within the American project is perhaps best imagined not as a monstrosity of insurgence, as insurgence is a necessary precursor to integration, but a failure of integration consequent to that insurgence. Immigration is well and truly American, just as long as those concerned are able to well and truly "melt" into the idiomatic Melting Pot.

Subtexts of Unreason in *Night of the Living Dead*

While there have been diverse interpretations of The *Night of the Living Dead*--a work so paradigmatic in its inspiration of a new genre dispensation is likely to generate such discussion--it's worth looking for a moment at Romero's own interpretation of his film's subtext. Romero himself claims that the misinterpretation of his film has led to a great deal of its success. The true subtext of the film, he claims, is one of failure, not valiant resistance. He says the failure of he survivors to survive is not simply a result of the inexorable tide of the coming hordes, but instead results from their failure to truly come together in their resistance. As a result of this failure to integrate, they bring about their own demise.

What do we make of this from the perspective of Unreason? Given our discussion above of the function of the failure to integrate as a site of unreason, the failure of this film's characters to correlate and integrate their objectives can be seen as a microcosmic mirroring of the failure to integrate with those zombies who constitute the film's antagonists. In Monelon's theory, a failure to integrate with the social body is what creates sites of "unreason." The narrative presented in *Night of the Living Dead* presents two such sites--one of the zombies as an unreasoned mass, and the other of the survivors failing to constitute together a reasoned body. It is both then a narrative of monstrosity, and one of a failure to respond to monstrosity in a properly reflexive and integrated way. One compounds the other, and they each become functions of a broader unreasoning.

In the context of a sociohistorical interpretation, the function of the zombies in this film can be better understood through an examination of their origin. If monsters began on the outskirts and then immigrated to the center of the social body, whence came this film's zombies? Within the film, it's briefly mentioned on a radio broadcast that a probe has recently returned from near Venus, though has exploded in the earth's atmosphere. It's never made clear if this is the genesis of the zombie outbreak, but it's generally adopted as such. The very inexplicability of the outbreak contributes to its monstrosity. Were the zombies simply scientized and explained away, they would cease to be threateningly human, grotesquely reminiscent of ourselves. As it is however, they remain ultimately unexplained (at least until the film's sequels), making them feel as inexorable as an act of god.

Zombies are almost unique in the annals of popular horror for in their resemblance of us-- they are literally our friends, our family, our neighbors, only distorted and modified to a kind of paradigmatically unreasoning mindlessness that casts them as negativized mirrors of ourselves.

They are us through a glass darkly. If the monstrous is, after all, a grotesque combination of what should not be combined, what could be more sacrosanct than ourselves? What could be more damnable than a version of ourselves lacking that quality according to which we are human?

Here is a possible sociohistorical casting of the system of relations I've above described, within an historical context. While it is likely not conclusive, and likely not comprehensively reflective of Romero's intentions in his portrayal, it provides an interesting lens through which to view the events of the film. If the zombies in the film are reflections, as Monleon would claim, of our sense of the origination of unreason within our culture, they may be construed as representative of the same genus of perceived mindless contamination and dehumanized humanity on display in the spread and intensification of the communist threat. By the same token that the Communist threat was not characterized by an absence of reason, an absence of industry, but rather by a perversion and problematic recasting of these elements, the zombies in this film are not hideously inhuman--they are hideously human. As Stieg would attest, the very humanity, the very mundanity of their mein is the foundation of the grotesquery they present. If we were to accept such an interpretation, then what to make of the survivors? They are us. They are us in all our variety: black, white, man, woman, old, young. Their failure, as Romero identifies it, is the failure of their perceived strength, and an echo of Romero's own history: a failure to integrate.

Night of the Living Dead and the Two-Act Horror Function

Turning now to the presuppositional operation of the horror genre, how can this understanding of horror as a two-act performance from grotesque representation to judgement be applied to an understanding of *Night of the Living Dead*, and how can this interplay be productively understood as a manifestation of Monleon's sociohistorical architecture? Just as preceding horror films, among which there were a number of zombie stories, *Night of the Living*

Dead plays according to the rule of the two-part structure inherent within the architecture of the horror narrative. An absence of audience expectation would render the story a non-starter, while a failure of resolution would render it not a story at all. Romero's film, however, provides a subversion of expectation for audiences accustomed to the horror structures typical of Fifties and Sixties horror.

To begin, with it bears mentioning that audiences experiencing *Night of the Living Dead* did not have the broad base of zombie-based horror experiences and expectations that a modern viewer might bring to these types of films. Zombies are our current monster du jour. In film, television, comics, video games, and podcasts, modern audiences are thoroughly versed in the lore of the zombie invasion. Given the modern effulgence of zombie-based media, it may be difficult to imagine a horror-media-substrate in which zombies were not thought of primarily in the form of invasion, but as individual monsters more typical of classical horror-monster narratives. Zombies still existed, certainly, but not in the forms to which modern viewers, readers, and players have become accustomed. In films such as *White Zombie*, *I Walked with a Zombie*, *Revolt of the Zombies*, and numerous others, all predecessors to modern zombie interpretations, these monsters do not travel in the hordes familiar to modern audiences. Instead, they are individuals, often the creation of voodoo priests, perhaps more reminiscent of a spiritualized Frankenstein's monster than the modern invasion narratives familiar to modern viewers.

In addition to this difference, the zombie films before *Night of the Living Dead*, such as they were, largely centered around zombies springing from Caribbean and African locales, allowing these monsters and their creators to be cast as foreigners not only in an ontological sense, but also possessing a physicality which marked them as geographically other, being as

there were most often black or of Eastern descent, flagging them as inherent outsiders. In both *I Walked with a Zombie* and *White Zombie*, the zombies on display are dark skinned, bestial, brutish. They are portrayed as sufficiently inhuman in their mein--filthy bodies and bugged out eyes--to flag as grotesque even if they were not rendered mindless my the actions of their creators. These monsters are of the true Outsider type, identified by Monleon as belonging to early stages of Gothic development, wherein the horror of the narrative derives from that which is properly, geographically Outside the social body. If the normative Western heroes of these films exemplify the normativity of the enlightened social body, their monstrous foils constitute the most foreign threat imaginable.

While the horror artifacts of the era preceding *Night of the Living Dead* may have acclimated viewers to threatening outsiders, monsters emerging from the periphery of society, and even to the possibility of monsters as grotesque reinterpretations of ourselves ala stories such as Jekyll and Hyde, Romero's paradigm marked the first instance of a monstrosity that encompassed the whole of the social body, a monster that wasn't simply "us," but "Us." In *Night of the Living Dead*, the zombies are not foreigners. They are not distant threats from exotic locales which hapless Westerners may encounter through ill luck. Rather, they are us. The zombies of Romero's creation emerge from within the social body, in a visceral sense ARE the social body, and are far more emblematic of Monleon's later stages of Gothic development than preceding horror narratives.

The zombies presented in *Night of the Living Dead* are not then merely some thematic amplification of preceding zombie tropes, but are instead demonstrative of an entirely novel paradigm, the Zombie Invasion (Bishop 94). While in the other movies mentioned, it became the actions of the protagonists which unwittingly brought them in contact with the zombie threat,

Night of the Living Dead brought the threat home, foisting them upon the group of survivors with a suddennes that entirely defies any attempt to frame them as paradigmatically foreign. In fact, given their emergence from the very ground, it is arguable that the zombies portrayed in Romero's films are perhaps more native to this land than ourselves.

Notably, while the zombie narratives coming before *Night of the Living Dead* frame zombies as invasive anomalies, things emerging from the periphery, essentially from outside the social body, Romero's dispensation shifted this focus to zombies as a threat of replacement for the social body. The very collectivity of this new threat is the key to its threatening nature. While previous films had portrayed monstrous invasion--from blobs to aliens to demons--Romero's zombies were the first instance of invasive insiders, monsters native to the social body while simultaneously entirely inimical to it. The zombies here are predators, and the siege setup of the film seems to portray the conflict as a zero sum game which must culminate either with the zombies' elimination or our own.

Placed within the established horror framework of expectation/delivery, the Romero zombie paradigm does not simply subvert audience expectations as to delivery, but establishes an entirely new network of expectations, substantially different from those of the preceding zombie films. Zombie scholar Kyle Bishop has described this shift as one from a framing of the narrative goal as the reestablishment of normative society to instead one of survival (96). How does one go about simply eliminating the threat when the threat is so all-encompassing that it threatens to replace the normativity against which it articulates itself?

Horror films as well as zombie films preceding *Night of the Living Dead* also tend to deliver a different sort of narrative resolution from Romero's film, one far more steeped in the classical models of narrative resolution. In the three pre-Romero films mentioned above, the

narrative resolution is predictable: the zombie(s) die, their creator dies, the heroes stand battered but victorious. Within such narratives, what is the threat? Simply the death of the hero. If the chiselled American is unable to put an end to the Zombie threat, he will die, simple as that. The zombie-creating priest may survive to wreak havoc again, but it will be a havoc of the periphery, never coming close to the heart of the social body. Perhaps the priest will be destroyed in the sequel.

In traditional horror architecture, the narrative structure is framed as Society vs. Monster, where the combined mores and standards of the social body are articulated as resistance to the monstrous threat, neutralizing it such as to return the situation to the status quo. In *Night of the Living Dead* this narrative mechanism is subverted, and the society presented, the ragtag group of survivors is incapable of aligning their intentions in such a way as to resist the zombie threat. The zombie threat too is reframed, no longer captured by simple designation as an Other. While the zombies remain grotesquely foreign, they become a sort of social assemblage unto themselves, constituting nothing so much as a hideously unified counter-society to the disorganized normativity of the survivors. With the zombies presenting such a monstrous unity to the disjointed efforts of the film's heroes, can the victory of the disorganized remnants of normalcy be thought of as an unqualified return to the status quo?

So, given this subversion of audience expectation as to the resolution of the monster narrative, what expectations have been explicitly violated, and what is the function of these violations?

First, within the zombie tradition prior to *Night of the Living Dead*, victory is portrayed as a kind of normative inevitability, where even a failure to defeat the monster is imagined as a reaffirmation of social normativity. If the hero fails, if the zombies win, if the priest continues his

reign of terror, the monsters in traditional narrative architecture remain monstrous. They continue to be outsiders, peripheral invaders and Others, operating on the outskirts of a normative society which will, presumably, continue to see them as exemplifying an outsider status. To put it in brief, even if the monster wins, there will still be a society to perceive that monster as monstrous--they will continue to be an outsider to a normative inside.

By violating this expectation as to the presumed stability of the social status quo, *Night of the Living Dead* posited the possibility of the monstrous replacement of the social body, a reality reflective of the social circumstances within which it emerged. If the monsters in the Zombie Invasion paradigm are victorious, they become the normative center. The game within a Romero style zombie film is, as above, zero sum. Either the zombie threat will be neutralized, or it will become something like a zombie planet, a grim visioned imagined in later Romero zombie films, notably *Day of the Dead*, where the survivors are themselves peripheral outsiders to a status quo wherein zombies have replaced humans as the dominant surface-dwelling species.

Second, the unity of the social body against which monsters articulate themselves is an operating assumption of much horror narrative, in which the Monstrous is portrayed as antithetical to the unified front of non-monstrous normativity. The chiselled American is recognizable as the hero of preceding zombie films because he's exemplary of chiselled-Americanness. It is presumed that, although he may act alone in his crusade against the foreign zombie threat, he operates with the implicit sanction of a society that also perceives the narrative's monsters as monstrous. While he may only be the only one aware of the threat, his solitude is only the more reflective of his need to bring the normative Inside to bear on the Outside threat.

Night of the Living Dead subverts this expectation in great fashion, with the failure of the characters portrayed to integrate and unify the very cause of their failure--the zombies are monstrous, yes, but their siege only succeeds by virtue of the failure of the non-zombie characters to come together in a body as tightly knit as the animalistic social body of the zombies themselves. *Night of the Living Dead* asks what happens when the Inside is put under sufficient pressure from the Outside threat that its assumption of unity and coherence comes under question. The answer to this question is unequivocal: when placed in a position where characters are tasked to either integrate and unify or die, the film ends with a montage of carnage, and our hero is thrown on a pyre with his fellow dead. The Inside, Romero argues, may be less unified than it might seem.

V: Conclusion

In the preceding chapters, we have moved from a general discussion of the horror genre as a demonstration of agentive unreason within Monelon's framework through a discussion of the presuppositional, two-act structure of the horror genre, as well as how this two-part structure presents a potential site for critical action. We've then explored a popular example of this genre in the form of George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*, which reflects notions of unreason both from within Romero's own life and within the culture, entertainment and political, from which it was written.

As a site of further study, although the two-act structure of horror seems to dovetail decently with Monleon's sociohistorical model of the gothic, it would be interesting to see how it plays with the other theorists' models of horror genre. This study, although it has made nods to the works of numerous horror theorists, has restricted its synthesis primarily to the works of Jose Monleon and Edwards & Graulund, whose theories of sociohistorical gothicism and grotesque aesthetic have been treated as two expressions of the same theoretical move. What might be generated if these theories were united with a theoretical approach from outside of literary theory, such as either feminist or critical race theory? The latter would be a particularly interesting lens through which to examine *Night of the Living Dead*. Because of the genetic relationships between divergent theories of horror narrativity and aesthetic, any such combinatoriality is likely to open some interesting parallax; what has been presented here is only one such conjunction among many.

Within this study's purview specifically, further work could also be done in disentangling the notions of personal/psychological unreason and cultural/sociohistorical unreason in their operation within the field of horror narrative. While it may be in poor taste to attempt to

disarticulate these two domains, the personal and the social seem, at least in the case of this study's artifact, to be easily enough discerned to generate interesting results. But what are the boundaries of this distinction, and how safe can it be to make such a distinction? This is will remain for the time an open question.

The horror genre generates perennial interest, and an overview of the topic creates the impression there have nearly been as many works written on the genre as such as have been written WITHIN the genre. It is likely that, just as each exemplar of the horror genre may indicate something about the conditions of its authorship, historical and personal, each example of theory meant to explain these works will similarly demonstrate something about their author and the circumstances of their origin. This historical changeability is similarly the source both of continued interest in this body of theory and in the works which generate it. In line with Freud's theory of the unheimlich, horror literature and horror theory each present us with the impression of something new, but perhaps only because it's been forgotten. They are each parts of the genre's uncanny mirror, which shows us what is bizarre, threatening, grotesque, troubling, uncanny, but only through the use of what is eerily familiar. What we fear most is what we already know.

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