

Gangs and Guilt: Towards a New Theory of Horror Film

“Horror films give us back our sins as monsters.”
(Sam J. Miller)

Horror films are always about something being dismissed that needs to be taken seriously. Scholarship is virtually unanimous in its belief that that something is fear: “If it is the movie’s aim to terrify, horrify or frighten, it qualifies as a horror production.”¹ To some extent, this is simply a tautology that muddies the waters by conflating horror as an *experience* with horror as a *genre*:² if ‘horror’ as an emotion can be defined as “what we feel when anything frightens us or promotes fear or terror,”³ it follows that horror as a genre is all about, to cite Hantke’s title, *Creating and Marketing Fear*. Scholars of horror have differed widely on what *kinds* of fear exactly the horror film evokes—the list here ranges from formless fears (with “Fear of death and the unknown”⁴ ranking right at the top) to concrete social and political fears⁵ such as atomic anxieties⁶ and World War III panic⁷—, and they have investigated different *reasons* why viewers might agree to expose themselves to such

¹ Muir 1. This assumption is so *a priori* that it remains unstated in many sources, although it is also an exceedingly common statement. Stephen King, an undisputed expert on the theme, has described “Horror, terror, fear, panic” as the province of the horror genre (*Danse Macabre* 26). Scholars have overwhelmingly agreed with him. A small and random sample of scholarly works casting fear as the central mover and shaker of horror might include Büssing; Cantor / Oliver 64-67; Clemens 1-2; Cowan 5-18; Derry, *Dark Dreams 2.0* 110, 363-4, and “More Dark Dreams” 162; Fahy, “Introduction” 1-2; Grant’s “Introduction” to *Planks of Reason*, xii-xiii; Grodal 249; Hanich’s *Pleasurable Fear*; Hantke, *Horror Film: Creating and Marketing Fear*; Hutchings 7 and 81; Manchel, *Terrors of the Screen*; Praver’s *The Film as Tale of Terror*; Sipos 5; Schomacker; Spehr; Telotte, “Through a Pumpkin’s Eye” 116-17; D. L. White 131 and 142-44; and Woodend.

² As perfectly encapsulated in Davis / Natale’s “the horror film has the intent to horrify” (38).

³ Alan Jones, “So what is horror?,” *Rough Guide* ix.

⁴ Alan Jones, *Rough Guide* 3; see also Carroll, *The Philosophy* 182 on the fear of the “unknowable” in horror; White 131-2 on fear of the unknown, and, of course, Lovecraft: “The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown” (12).

⁵ See, for example, Büssing 146-7; Freeland 85; Jackson 10 and 148; Doherty 182; Greenberg 87; Mendik, “Part One,” 11; Muir 80; Wood, *Hollywood* 149; Derry, “More Dark Dreams” 163.

⁶ For example Büssing 146-7; Skal, *The Monster Show* 250.

⁷ For example: Skal, *The Monster Show* 230.

fears, ranging from *frisson*⁸ to catharsis⁹ to sadism¹⁰ to masochism.¹¹ But hardly anyone has questioned the basic formula: horror (the emotion) = fear; ergo horror (film) evokes fear.

To me, the fear-theory has always seemed thoroughly dissatisfying, largely because it glosses over the central fact that we are the source of most of our fears: “ghosts, in the end, adopt the motivations and perhaps the very souls of those who behold them. If they are malevolent, their malevolence comes from us.”¹² After all, *we* are the ones creating the potential for nuclear disaster, World War III or other forms of Armageddon. So long as our ideas about horror are content to stick with effect, the fear-theory will serve just fine. Digging for *causes*, however, quickly raises the suspicion that perhaps the horror film is after something else as well. This is, in fact, the main idea that I would like to advance and document in the course of this essay: that horror films, and in particular those showing gangs, are more concerned with guilt than fear. They are not only, perhaps not even primarily, scary rides. They are also, and perhaps more importantly, guilt trips.

Only two writers so far—neither, incidentally, a film scholar—have taken issue with the basic fear-theory. Sam J. Miller, who describes his job as “organizing homeless folks who have been displaced by the tens of thousands by rising rents to fight back against city policies and practices that abet gentrification,”¹³ became the first writer to link horror films with guilt rather than fear. To him, “Haunted House Films Are Really About the Nightmares of Gentrification”;

⁸ As Carroll has inimitably put it: fascination with the impossible being outweighs the distress it engenders (*Philosophy* 206). On *frisson* as the main reason for watching horror, see Cowan 17, Manchel 110; Twitchell, *Dreadful Pleasures*, particularly 65.

⁹ For example, Dika, *Games* 10; Grixti xv.

¹⁰ See, for instance, Morris’s “The Justification of Torture-Horror.”

¹¹ Alan Jones, *Rough Guide* ix; Steven Allen.

¹² Stephen King, in a comment on Peter Straub’s *Ghost Story* (*Danse Macabre* 289).

¹³ Miller, “Haunted House Films,” accessed November 4, 2013.

Ground ploy expresses “Guilt over the North American genocide,” and from there, the possibilities are as endless as they are enticing. The second writer to hack through the apparently unbreakable tie between horror and fear is the philosopher Eugene Thacker, who had this to say about the meaning of horror:

I would propose that horror be understood not as dealing with human fear in a human world (the world-for-us), but that horror be understood as being about the limits of the human as it confronts a world that is not just a World, and not just the Earth, but also a Planet (the world-without-us). This also means that horror is not simply about fear, but instead about the enigmatic thought of the unknown. [...] Horror is about the paradoxical thought of the unthinkable. In so far as it deals with this limit of thought, encapsulated in the phrase of the world-without-us, horror is “philosophical.” But in so far as it evokes the world-without-us as a limit, it is a “negative philosophy” (akin to negative theology, but in the absence of God).

Briefly, the argument [...] is that “*horror*” is a *non-philosophical attempt to think about the world-without-us philosophically*.¹⁴

To which I would add: horror is also the thought that *we* are turning the world-for-us into the world-without-us. Horror expresses, in other words, not only a philosophical contemplation of the act, but also of the fact that we are *committing* it.

Four points specific to horror as a genre seem to me to provide adequate confirmation for my suspicion. They are: the *themes of horror*; the *normalization of abnormality and the rejection of the future*; the *viewer’s alignment with Evil*, and the *split between viewer alignment and allegiance*.

The Themes of Horror

Horror films involving gangs of evil children address guilt thematically in a way that points directly at the guilty involvement of their *audience*.

¹⁴ Thacker 8-9 (emphases original).

To cite just a few examples: In Fritz Kiersch's *Children of the Corn* (1984), the children in a small Midwestern farming community murder all adults in the town because the adults are destroying the earth through pesticides and other forms of irresponsible farming. In Wolf Rilla's iconic 1960 film *Village of the Damned*, the English village of Midwich is in danger of losing its entire adult population to a cold-blooded killer gang of blond-haired, glowing-eyed children of dubious paternity—in fact, the film's working title, *The Midwich Cuckoos*, suggests strongly that it is uncertainty of progeny that is the film's real horror, not its overt theme of alien invasion. The town's adults solve the problem of being faced with a gang of insubordinate children by dropping the A-bomb on the barn in which the children have congregated, wiping them all out in one go. *Village of the Damned* has been read, and correctly I think, as an expression of atomic fears of the late 1950s, but never, to my knowledge, as the thinly veiled guilt trip for the attack on Hiroshima that it so clearly is. Such links are even more unmissable in Narciso Ibáñez Serrador's rather ironically titled *¿Quién puede matar a un niño?* (1976), variously translated as *Who Can Kill a Child*, *Would you Kill a Child?*, *Could you Kill a Child?*, and, of course, *Island of the Damned*. Two versions of the film are extant. The more commonly known version tells the bog-standard child gang horror story: a British couple arrives on a small island off the coast of Spain, planning to spend their holidays there, only to find the island ominously deserted. After their shock discovery that the entire adult population has been murdered by the island's children, for reasons that remain of course unexplained, they fall victim to the killer kid gang themselves. The rarer edition features the same narrative preceded by 8 minutes of documentary footage that answers the film's title question, *Who can kill a child?*. The footage shows 20th-century atrocities perpetrated against children in Auschwitz, India,

Pakistan, Korea, Vietnam, and Nigeria. Each segment is incongruously separated by a brief audio-only snippet of children singing and giggling, and overlaid with statistical data showing the number of children killed in whatever war, genocide or ethnic cleansing is currently on display: 14 million children in the Second World War, the total death toll of which has been estimated at 60 million; 1.2 million children—out of a total death toll of 2 million people—in the Indo-Pakistani war; over half a million children—out of a death toll of 1.2 million people—in the Korean War; 1.8 million children out of a total death toll of 3 million people in Vietnam; 390,000 children out of a death toll of half a million people in Biafra. More often than not, then, the statistical survival rate for adults in war, including that of soldiers in combat, is considerably higher than that of children. While the child gang's motivation in Serrador's film remains obscure without this documentary prequel, its inclusion obviously defines the film as a revenge flick on a grand scale.

Notably, none of these films link guilt to individual evil deeds, instead confronting us with a universal guilt (hence, we might suspect, the recurring gang-theme) that is not always directly tied to moral transgression and for which, as a result, nobody assumes responsibility. This is, in fact, the horror film's usual *modus operandi*, and it is also what makes guilt as inescapable as original sin. We might think of this in terms of the hardwiring of built-in human imperatives versus the software of personal decision-making: the software we can re-write, the hardwiring we can't. Horror films portray both kinds of guilt, personal and universal, software and hardwiring. A direct link between the horrors on screen and (someone else's) transgression—a fisherman is run over by a bunch of drunk teens, knows what they did last summer, and comes back to slaughter them one by one—does not directly implicate the viewer. But when a horror film attacks human hardwiring, it goes for

everyone's jugular. Hard-wired convictions include truisms that are so universal as to be near-inescapable: Families are the pillars of society. Children are innocent. Fighting for freedom is noble. Democracy is the best of all possible political systems. Kind-hearted capitalism is possible. The human race must survive at all costs. Individual sacrifice is acceptable, even noble, in order to save the community / the country / the world. Guilt uncoupled from moral wrongdoing arises from an unquestioning faith in these hard-wired imperatives: the destruction of our planet, for example, is a direct result of human progress and development. We're simply keeping warm when our forebears could not. That we have the *right* to keep warm, the right to survive, the right to provide an even warmer place for our children, is part of the hardwiring that we find exceedingly difficult to question. The horror guilt-trip is payback for our inability to see the destruction caused by our most dearly held convictions.

A number of horror films serve up guilt in the absence of a crime, which is another way of saying that they work purely on the level of 'hardwiring.' In such films, nobody is, on the face of it, guilty of anything. The horrors unfolding on the screen are explicitly linked to guilt, but that guilt is not linked to any individual harmful decision. A good example is Moreau and Palud's *Ils* (*Them*, 2006), in which a gang of children terrorize and murder an adult couple because, as the film's final line states, "They wouldn't play with us!" To take this literally, that is: to read this as a film about child neglect, would be a stretch. Until the final line, child neglect simply does not come up in the film, and the actions of the evil children are as incomprehensible to the audience as they are to the hunted couple. "They wouldn't play with us!" is sprung on the viewer at the very end, as a retrospective motivator for the entire story. In the narrative context of this particular film, the explanation is

absurdly implausible. But read in the broader context of the horror tradition, the statement makes sense: guilt needs no concrete evil deed or justification to take center stage in horror.

Most films focus on concrete deeds that merit guilt—it is, in fact, difficult to find a horror film that does not, in some form or another, send audiences on a guilt trip for crimes ranging from child rejection, child abuse, child rape, child abandonment, awful family interaction, greed, ecological, social, political and war crimes, and above all, for the persistent *denial of responsibility* for all of it. But films like *Its*, in which guilt, although it plays no part *within* the story, is motivated as *the reason for* the story, also show that the horror film proceeds on an *a priori* assumption of guilt. It is an undercurrent of the genre, festering in its damp cellars, simply, incomprehensibly and rationale-defyingly *there*, just as it is simply there in the world of Kafka's writing.

Normalizing the abnormal, rejecting the future

Horror films portraying gangs of evil children normalize the abnormal by casting murder recognizably as child's play; and they reject the future by denying that adulthood is the children's future, thereby also denying that children and adults form part of the same race of humans.

*Peopletoy*s, a.k.a. *Devil Times Five*, a.k.a. *Tantrum*, a.k.a. *The Horrible House on the Hill*¹⁵ features a gang of murderous children, including fifteen-year-old Sister Hannah, so called because she appears in a nun's habit, thirteen-year-old vain and

¹⁵ As actress Joan McCall explains on the DVD supplemental feature: 'It's been through a lot of names.' *Peopletoy*s (1974), dir. Sean MacGregor and David Sheldon (uncredited), written by Sandra Lee Blowitz, John Durren and Dylan Jones.

beautiful David, twelve-year-old soldier boy Brian, pyromaniac fourteen-year-old Susan, and four-year old cutie Moe. The Fearsome Five are pitted against a group of adults in a snowed-in holiday chalet: arrogant and overbearing patriarch Papa Doc and his entourage consisting of his daughters Julie and Lovely, Julie's partner and Lovely's ex Rick, Papa Doc's disgruntled employee Harvey, Harvey's alcoholic wife Ruth, and the mentally retarded Ralph, who serves the guests as handyman, cook and general dogsbody. Once the children are taken in by the adults, the rest of the film is given over to a predictable series of gory slayings.

A distinguishing aspect of the film is its explicit definition of all killings as communal child's play, visualised precisely as described by child psychologists from Spencer to Montessori: as a means to expend superfluous energy, to train for survival in the adult world, and to acquire new skills. The children entrap and kill Papa Doc with the help of an absurdly elaborate contraption such as only a child could devise, a chair swinging from the ceiling with a long sword-like stabbing instrument attached to its seat. Immediately after Papa Doc's death, David and Brian have a row over who deserves credit for rigging the murder weapon. In a subsequent scene, the children place Papa Doc's corpse outside in a sitting position and build a snowman around it. Pyromaniac Susan sets Ruth on fire after Brian and David have set the stage by pouring petrol over her; afterwards all children dance merrily around the screaming and twisting bonfire that is Ruth. Little Moe, upbraided by Lovely for playing with her make-up, kills Lovely with Hannah's help as Lovely is taking a bath: Hannah holds Lovely's head under water, while Moe pours Papa Doc's pet piranhas into the tub, giggling gaily at Lovely's death throes. All killings are collaborative, the result of elaborate contraptions and planning; the impression one is left with is that of childish problem-solving akin to building a Lego castle or a model ship. The final scene shows

all kids and corpses, their ‘peopletoys,’ assembled in the living room, the corpses arranged in a circle in the way a little girl might arrange dolls for a tea party. The children interact with them as a child interacts with dolls, with the child speaking both the lines assigned to the doll and his or her own. When finally the decision is made to move on—‘Game’s over,’ Susan announces bossily—, little Moe cries inconsolably, wailing: ‘I don’t want to leave Julie!,’ but Hannah soothes her with the timeless parental classic: ‘We’re gonna have some brand-new toys soon.’ Mollified, Moe pecks dead Lovely on the cheek with a cheery ‘Bye, Lovely!,’ exactly the way in which a little girl would kiss a favourite doll good-bye when Mummy puts her foot down: No, you can’t take your doll into the bathtub. The play-theme is so elaborately enacted that it practically trumps the terror the scene seeks to create: there is an ‘Aaaawwww, how cute’-quality about it that contrasts absurdly with, but also quite overpowers, the visual reminders of the awful reality behind the game—gaping wounds, Ruth’s charred face, blood everywhere.

Peculiarly, the film makes absolutely no distinction between these deadly games and ‘normal’ kid behaviour. Although we must assume, particularly given the ending with its talk of embarking on a search for new toys, that the children fully plan to kill everyone the minute they set foot into the house, all killings are apparently motivated by anger at situations that are part and parcel of every child’s life—for instance being shouted at for playing with things you’re not supposed to touch, being belittled, being beaten at a board game. The film portrays no qualitative difference between these normal tantrums and gory murder. Thus the film casts murder not only in terms of interaction among children, but also in terms of the interaction between adults and children. Significantly, all children are ‘assigned’ an adult: Hannah latches onto Ralph; Susan willingly submits to Ruth’s mothering; David plays chess with

Harvey and wants to be his 'friend;' Moe develops a very cuddly relationship with Lovely. But if this seems to imply, at least initially, a 'normal' child-adult relationship, with the adult in authority over the child and the child in training to become an adult, the viewer is soon disabused of this idea. All men in the film are defined by careerism and greed: Papa Doc, the film's Alpha Male, brags tirelessly about his own 'achievements' and riches; the other men are cast as little more than circling sharks, jockeying for position and hoping for offal from his table. All women are defined by sex: the wanton (Lovely), the willing (Julie), and the frigid lush Ruth who rejects Harvey's increasingly desperate sexual advances in favour of her love affair with Jim Beam. There are no adults in this film that could serve as role models for children; if these characters are as good as it gets, adulthood richly merits rejection.

Indeed, the 'natural' link between children and adults, and adulthood as the natural and inevitable future of childhood, is refused several times throughout the film. When Julie, for example, comments on the children's strange behaviour, Rick offers an explanation: 'Kids today,' he tells her, 'are smoking pot at ten and a bong at twelve. So we're not gonna be expecting them to be normal like us.' Kids, in other words, are *not* little adults-in-training; they are fundamentally different from adults, 'strange' in the sense of 'abnormal.'

One of the most disturbing instances of child abnormality—and this would, at least in Rick's judgment of 'kids today', apply not only to the Fearsome Five but to children in general—is the film's premise that children, unlike adults, are fundamentally incapable of experiencing guilt. This, too, is expressed in the murder-as-a-game metaphor. In *The Power of Play: Learning What Comes Naturally*, child psychologist David Elkind, rejecting the definition of child's play as training for

adulthood advanced by Spencer, Groos, Montessori and Vygotsky, among others, has offered the simplest answer of all to the question ‘Why do children play?’: Because it comes naturally. Because it is fun.

Let us consider, for a moment, the scandalous consequences of applying Elkind’s insight to films in which the murder of adults is visualized as child’s play. Why do children in horror films murder adults? Because it comes naturally. Because it is fun.

That is, of course, precisely how a horror film would portray it. Throughout *Peopletoy*s, the children’s joy is clearly visualized through cheery dances around burning people, happy giggles while building snowmen around corpses, or in the simple sense of achievement when a complicated murderous contraption turns out to work exactly as planned. But disturbingly enough, the joy of killing is not only a diegetic issue. The idea that children experience the killing of adults as a fun game turns out to be a major issue for filmmakers of and adult actors in horror films that feature children killing adults. Interviews with adults involved in making such films tend to focus on intense antagonism, to the point of physical violence, on the set, and link this implicitly or explicitly with the violence portrayed in the film. In 2006, *Peopletoy*s-producer Michael Blowitz reported that he was so upset with the film’s first director Sean MacGregor that ‘I took a swing at him and put him through a plate glass window.’¹⁶ Dawn Lyn, who played little Moe, remembered decades later that according to her mother, she fought with her brother more than usual while making the film. Her mother attributed this increased aggression ‘to the negativity of the roles we were playing, being murderers.’ Lyn herself, however, denied both fighting with

¹⁶ This and all following quotations are taken from ‘Interviews,’ 2006, supplementary materials, *Peopletoy*s DVD-release.

her brother or being in the least disturbed by the role she was playing. For adults involved in making the film, the diegetic violence was clearly traumatic to the point where it leaked out into the extra-diegetic world. But what of the children? Thirty-three years later, they still remembered how much fun they had. ‘It was a vacation for us,’ remembers Terre Turner who played soldier boy Brian, ‘we had a lot of fun doing it.’ Disturbingly, all the ‘fun’ mentioned by the then-child actors is directly linked with the murders, seen either as a great lark or even, in Piaget’s sense, as exercises in autonomy. Turner, for example, remembered that ‘I was the one who made everyone else whack everyone else, and I did this with great pleasure at twelve years old’ (the film, interestingly, portrays all killings as communal gang efforts and assigns no such leadership role to the Brian-character). And Dawn Lyn described, her eyes shining, the truly Freudian situation of killing Lovely (played by her real-life mother, Carolyn Stellar) by pouring real (albeit dead, or presumed-dead) piranhas into her bathtub, one of which actually latched onto her mother’s leg, wounding her.

Such radically diverging perceptions of violence—distinctly traumatic for adults, a hoot for kids—permeate the interviews of cast and crew members of other horror films as well, including films separated considerably from *Peopletoy*s by time, space and cultural context. Take the 2008 British film *The Children*, for example, an authentic Isn’t-this-fun kiddie slaughterfest of parents feebly trying to defend themselves against a gang of murderous children (final score: kids 4, adults 3). Post-production interviews with the adults on the set reveal both that they experienced severe trauma watching scenes in which the children killed adults *and* presumed a similarly traumatic experience on the part of the children. Actor Jeremy Sheffield, who played the first father figure dispatched, describes that considerable effort went into minimizing such trauma for the children: ‘We went through different games,

exercises, play [...] to make it very clear to the kids that it's a game, it's not real, whatever happens is not real, no matter how real it seems, it's not.'¹⁷ But Eva Birthistle, who played the last mother standing, seemed aware that such caution was unnecessary: 'their confidence just grew, like in the first week, then they were sort of... delighted that they were gonna kill us all [giggles].' Jane Karen, Child Wrangler on the set, confirms this impression with reference to one particularly traumatic scene:

There's a little girl who has to stab her mother in the eye with a pencil, and she really likes it. She's been really... good at that. They're just much better at the kind of bang-bang you're dead!-kind of games than you imagine, they're quite gory in their playing, and so it's not a big leap for them, whereas as adults we get very sensitive about [gasps] 'How do you, you know, explain this,' and those kids go: 'Oh yeah, I'm covered in blood, aren't I, because I just stabbed Mum Di...'

Horror films in which children gang up on adults turn child psychology on its head. They take the entire idea of 'normalization' out of the hands of adults who, diegetically, uphold their fondest illusions of control by severely underestimating murderous children as 'a little strange,' and extra-diegetically are at a loss to explain why playing at killing adults is so much fun. The gasps and the giggles indicate a considerable level of discomfort with the fact that the adults' desperate incantations that these murders are 'not real, whatever happens is not real' are apparently completely wasted on the kids. Adults need the distinction between games and reality; children don't. Adults need to repay their ghastly deeds in coin of guilt; children don't. Guilt is thereby cast as something that adults own, that properly belongs to the adult world, and only there. It is hardly a leap to read the narrative of horror movies involving child gangs both as metaphor and as manifesto: let's bring home to adults that which belongs to them.

¹⁷ This and following citations are taken from *The Making of The Children*, supplementary materials, DVD-release of *The Children* (2008), dir. and written by Tom Shankland.

Viewer Alignment with Evil: The Psychopathic Moment

As guilt flicks, horror films focus our attention on Evil, not the battle between Good and Evil, and certainly not on Good. Unlike in other genres (detective, thriller) there is usually neither *sympathy for the victims* of Evil nor *admiration for heroes* opposing it.

Stephen King, commenting on his novel *Carrie*, in which a teen is horribly bullied by a gang of classmates, has famously said that every kid who has ever had his gym shorts pulled down would be able to sympathize with Carrie's revenge: "In Carrie's destruction of the gym [...] we see a dream revolution of the socially downtrodden."¹⁸ We might read this to mean that his novel—and de Palma's film—are experienced entirely or predominantly from the viewpoint of the victim of bullying. Yet *Carrie*'s traumatic shower scene divides its point of view fairly evenly between covering Carrie and the attacking girls, giving the latter perhaps a slight edge. Visually, at least, the film's viewer is aligned at least as much, if not more, with the gang of bullies as with the victim.¹⁹ To me at least, this makes some sense: the even division between the gang and the victim's point of view seems to express that while the victim may lay claim to all of our sympathy, she does not command all of our identification. And indeed, why should she? The butt of the joke—the first girl in the class to get breasts; the fat boy; the kid with the thick spectacles; the kid cursed with a stammer or a harelip—is an exception, a lone individual: it only takes one, and there's usually one in every class. Bullies, on the other hand, are everywhere; they stalk as individuals and run in gangs. Just so in *Carrie*, where bullying is a communal activity. Some—such as Chris—are more spiteful than others; others—such as

¹⁸ King, *Danse Macabre* 201.

¹⁹ Lindsey has analyzed the scene at length in her essay "Horror, Femininity, and Carrie's Monstrous Puberty." For other analyses of *Carrie*, see Babington, Matusa, Pirie's "Carrie," and Bathrick.

Tommy and Sue—try to stay out of it; but bullies make up pretty much the rest of Carrie’s class. The moral imperative may move viewers to sympathize with the revenge of the bullied, as King says. But assuming that ‘identification’ is not entirely based on who we want to be, but also on who we are, it is more likely, on purely numerical grounds, that viewers are watching the shower scene from the mob’s perspective. If there is only one quarry to every pack of wolves, it should follow that most viewers of the scene can draw on hands-on experience as bullies, whereas relatively few actually know what it’s like to have your shorts pulled down, or to be pelted with tampons in the gym shower.

My point here is simply that what film critics have termed ‘identification’ (more on this term and its complexities below) may not be wholly determined by ethical stances. The question of ethics and identification is a particularly hairy one in horror films. Evil is the real deal—or, in Wood’s formulation, the monster is horror’s real hero;²⁰ Good, as far as the genre is concerned, can take a hike in the woods.²¹ So often, the struggle against Evil is against something undefined and undefinable (the Thing, the Blob, the Slime). Not having a concrete enemy deprives the struggler of nobility, of the ability to win, and of the *meaning* of victory: where is the dignity in escaping, temporarily, from encroaching slime? Good takes one of two guises: horror’s many victims—for whom viewers can hardly even muster sympathy—or, more rarely, an antagonist, a “zero hero”²² who, like the victims, is hapless, dimwitted, laughably inadequate to the task, and always at least ten steps behind Evil. “Anyone

²⁰ Wood, *Hollywood* 97.

²¹ Stephen King’s analysis of James Herbert’s *The Fog*: “our interest in Holman’s adventures and whether or not his girlfriend Casey will recover from the effects of her own bout with the fog [...] seems pallid when compared to our morbid let’s-slow-down-and-look-at-the-accident interest in the old lady who is eaten alive by her pet cats” (*Danse Macabre* 411).

²² I owe Stephen King for the lovely term, coined in *Danse Macabre* (441).

in a horror movie who leans on the shoulder of a professionally qualified male rescuer is as good as dead.”²³

My suspicion is that the horror film’s (and viewers’) greater interest in Evil is more than a default position arrived at by the exquisite boredom caused by Good: it is a matter of *identification*. In claiming this, I am swimming against a strong current of scholarly consensus that assumes that although they may claim more viewer *interest*, Bad, and even more so Evil, are ineligible for viewer *identification*.²⁴ However: assuming, as I do, that horror is more about guilt than about fear, it becomes possible to read viewer identification with Evil as a way to overcome fear. Identifying with Evil may result in guilt, but at least it propels the viewer from the place of Fear, the victim’s position—always held by Good, in horror—and into a position of power. Some philosophers have, in fact, built a fundamental definition of Evil on this very dialectic. Fred Alford, for example, has argued that if the desire to combat fear is a natural impulse, then identification with Evil is not an aberration but simply a human trait, a “psychopathic moment” that everyone experiences:

The psychopathic moment is a virtually universal moment in all lives. When we are faced with intolerable, uncontainable dread, the natural tendency is to identify with the persecutor, becoming the agent of doom, as the only way of controlling it. Evil is the attempt to inflict one’s doom on others, becoming doom, rather than living subject to it. In this sense evil is bad faith, the lie that one could escape one’s fate by inflicting it on others.²⁵

²³ “Wer sich an die starke Schulter eines beruflich qualifizierten männlichen Retters anlehnt, ist im Horrorfilm schon so gut wie tot” (Moldenhauer, Spehr and Windszus, “Law of the Dead” 13; my translation).

²⁴ See, for instance, Pomerance in his “Introduction” to *Bad*: “The villain we abhor is precisely the figuration we cannot accept as a version of ourselves, the screen on which we cannot see ourselves—our discrete and self-absorbed selves—projected. And the gorier the image—by the end of the twentieth century screen imagery had reached new heights of gore—the more easily we can deny it, withdraw into a narcissistic paradise where the world is perfect as long as we do not have to reach out and touch it” (17).

²⁵ Alford 58.

Transferring Alford's insights from the lofty heights of philosophy to the damp dungeons of horror shows us *why* horror films concern themselves more with guilt than with fear. Horror films are fictionalized "psychopathic moments" in which viewers are faced with the alternative between fear and guilt and the option to choose guilt as the safer route. To "identify with the persecutor" is the only way to avoid being terrified. We pay for our rejection of fear (the victim's position) in coin of guilt (by assuming the perp's position), although guilt will hardly deter us: "most of us feel guilty, at least sometimes. Neither guilt nor empathy will change this tendency to inflict terror on others, however."²⁶ "Terror," in Alford's reasoning, shifts meaning, from fear (of Evil) to guilt (the terror of recognizing ourselves as Evil). "We do not feel terror and *then* identify with the aggressor, or at least that is not the whole story. The terror stems *from* the identification with the aggressor, his aggression suddenly our own, directed against those we care about and depend on, including ourselves and our values."²⁷ And that, I think, is the second central aspect of horror: not only does it showcase the "psychopathic moment" when the viewer may choose guilt over fear, it also puts its finger on the gaping wound created by the viewer's simultaneous *alignment* with Evil and presumed *allegiance* to Good.

The split between alignment ('identity') and allegiance ('identification')

Films assign to viewers a specific point of view, which can be termed, somewhat muddily, an 'identity,' or more clearly: an alignment²⁸ (through, for instance, camera angles or voice-over narration). They also invite viewers to 'identify' (or more clearly: to form an allegiance), usually to the film's hero or victim. In most

²⁶ Alford 59.

²⁷ Alford 59.

²⁸ I am adopting here Murray Smith's use of the terms 'alignment' and 'allegiance' to replace the murkier, if more popular and intuitive, terms 'identity' and 'identification.'

genres (e.g. romantic comedies, thrillers, detective genres), alignment ('identity') and allegiance ('identification') are yoked together. However, horror films, and particularly those focusing on evil children, separate the two to a degree unusual and unworkable in other cinematic genres. Most often, horror films achieve this by forcing viewers into the visual perspective of the guilty party. Viewer allegiance is steered towards the victims of violence; visual alignment is linked with the murderous children's through first-person point-of-view camera angles. As a result, there really is no acceptable way of seeing a horror film since the viewer is forced into the perspective of either killer or victim:

either you identify with the slasher—you'd like to have a razor-sharp, foot-long machete in hand as well—or you identify with the worthless victim whose spectacular dismemberment you too merit. [...] Those unenviable viewing positions don't leave the audience much room to maneuver. Either you wish you had the power to carve up a score of unsuspecting victims or you envy the dead. The only way to prove yourself immune from the noxious influence of these dangerous films is [...]: You must denounce them. [...] acknowledging that you are a latter-day horror fan is tantamount to announcing that you too are a monster.²⁹

From the outset, then, horror places its viewers into an impossible viewing position: "The terror of the victim is supplanted by the delight of the torturer, which is being consciously shared by the audience: *that* is the source of horror."³⁰ Horror films featuring evil children achieve this by using visual alignment—most often POV-shots—to assign guilt to the two least likely parties (in the viewers' minds): children (within the film) and the audience (beyond the film). Possibly the best-known and certainly the most analyzed example³¹ is the lengthy opening sequence of John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978), which both communicates the obvious viewer allegiance—by motivating the viewers' pity for the victim and their understanding of

²⁹ Crane 3-4.

³⁰ Morris 51.

³¹ By Neale, Dika (*Games*), Saban, Adams ("Is that a carving knife?"), Hutchings 193-6, Telotte 26-7, Darryl Jones 116, Pinedo 73-4, Wood, *Hollywood* 171-2, and many others.

the parents' shock at the discovery of little Michael with a bloody knife—and compels a diametrically opposed visual alignment, since it is shot entirely from the six-year-old killer's perspective. Viewers endure a full four minutes during which they and Michael, or rather: they *as* Michael, look in through the window, observe the older sister necking with her boyfriend, watch them go upstairs, open the kitchen drawer to get the carving knife, follow the pair upstairs, put on a Halloween mask—the remainder of the scene is shot through the mask's eyeholes—, stab older sister to death, run down the stairs and out the door, and stop dead at the horrified shout: “Michael!” This series of point-of-view camera angles from Michael's perspective imposes the killer's visual identity on the viewer until Michael's father unmask him, at which point the camera pans around sharply to assume the kneeling father's point-of-view.³²

The forced visual alignment of the viewer with the killer through point-of-view camera angles for which *Halloween* offers such a prominent example is hardly rare in horror movies. Film after film subjects us to first-person point-of-view shots of the murderer pursuing his victim, knife drawn, gun cocked, hammer raised or chainsaw roaring. This visual perspective, ours as the murderer's, may not dominate the film, but it often governs the film's most traumatic scenes—as in the case of *Halloween*—and thus certainly gets itself noticed. Scholars have, in fact, grappled extensively with the meaning of point-of-view shots. The most popular explanation is a pragmatic one: the killer's point of view affords the most titillating shots of the victim about to be dispatched. Still, we must ask: if horror films are all about *fear*, why not force the audience more often into the victim's position rather than the killer's? Why not, for example, point-of-view-shots from the victim's perspective as

³² Dika has devoted 11 pages to a blow-by-blow analysis of this scene; see *Games of Terror* 33-44.

she races up the stairs, looking back to see the killer catching up? Or a point-of-view shot from inside the wardrobe where the victim is hiding, looking out fearfully to see if the killer is in the room? Such perspectives would undoubtedly elicit fear, if that were the point. But in fact, where such perspectives occur—relatively rarely—they tend to get less screen time than the killer’s and are clearly established as mere reverse-shots to the killer’s POV.³³ The result is that our allegiance with the victim, mandated by simple ethics, is undercut by visual alignment.

Ethical imperatives aside, horror’s portrayal of its victims—and of Good in general, as I have argued above—is often so (deliberately?) inept, callous or contemptuous that it becomes fairly difficult for viewers to dredge up either tears for victims or cheers for Good. Does the blonde bimbo who runs upstairs when she should have run outside garner the viewer’s sympathy or scorn?³⁴ Contempt for the victim is so pervasive in the horror tradition as to be an assumed viewer position, parodied, for example, in the horror-film spoof *Scary Movie* (2000), in which the victim, tearing out of the house, is confronted with two road signs: “Safety” with an arrow pointing to the left, “Death” with an arrow pointing to the right (after a bit of dithering, she chooses—to nobody’s surprise—“Death”). In films featuring minuscule murderers, such as the doll-sized killers of *Puppetmaster* (1989), *Pet Sematary* (1989), or the *Child’s Play*-franchise, do we really feel sympathy for all the victims who are so easily enticed down to the killer’s level, by bending over, falling down, offering hugs, or crawling under the bed, as if they *meant* to make themselves as accessible as possible to a knife wielded by a one foot tall assassin? Our abiding

³³ Noted, among others, by Hutchings in *The Horror Film* 196.

³⁴ Some of that contempt may actually be unearned: the audience, Stephen King has claimed, is often not all that much smarter. “When they’re watching a horror movie, everyone in the audience knows the hero or the heroine is stupid to go up those stairs, but in real life they always do—they smoke, they don’t wear seat belts, they move their family in beside a busy highway where the big rigs drone back and forth all day and all night” (*Pet Sematary* 229).

contempt for victims is, of course, morally problematic because it deprives the victims of the nobility of suffering and denudes their deaths of all sense of tragedy.³⁵ But it is a sign of the way in which the horror film operates: our interest is engaged not on behalf of the victim but on behalf of the killer. What the horror film wants from us is not fear but an admission of guilt.

Let us take a look at one of the rare films in which the victims are shown a bit more respect than is common in horror films, a film where viewer allegiance with the victims might be unusually strong, and see if the disruption between alignment and allegiance still holds. Drew Goddard's *The Cabin in the Woods* (2012)³⁶ is a send-up of the most clichéd horror set-up of all: five teenagers disappear into a cabin in the woods to spend the weekend, at least two of them with explicit sexual plans (the kind for which you are always swiftly and messily dispatched in horror films). The five are promptly and predictably attacked by zombies. An hour later, the survivor count is down to two, the smartest boy, a pot-head, and the smartest girl (the stereotypical "Final Girl," to use the term coined by Carol Clover³⁷). Those two discover what the audience has been aware of from the start: that the entire story of their entrapment and deaths was engineered by a bunch of lab-coat clad bureaucrats (the film's gang of bullies, if you like) who are watching their death struggles on a huge screen, drinking and eating, giggling and commenting, even betting on the youngsters' survival chances. In one particularly repellent scene, the bureaucrats watch two of the doomed teenagers going off into the woods with explicit intentions (even these intentions are not entirely down to teen hormones, but manipulated by pheromones injected into the

³⁵ As pointed out by Derry, *Dark Dreams 2.0* 6.

³⁶ Huddleston described the film, in the week of its London release, as "not just as a celebration of horror cinema, but as a compilation of its greatest hits and, perhaps, as an epitaph" ("Time Out's 100 best horror films" 62). For an interpretation, see Bernice Murphy 15-47 and Kimberly Jackson, "Metahorror."

³⁷ See her works "Her Body, Himself" and *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*.

scenario by the lab-coated technicians) and take bets on whether the girl will have time to disrobe before the zombies get her.

What, if anything, could justify such despicable behavior? The stated purpose of the slaughter is to ‘appease the monsters’: in the world of the lab-coated bureaucrats, despite its sterile appearance, every nightmare creature, from zombies to Dracula to Frankenstein’s monster, is real. The only way to prevent these monsters from destroying the world is through an annual blood sacrifice, which takes the form of the stereotypical horror flick. The two surviving teens manage to break through from the lab-engineered woods to the lab itself, unleashing the monsters on the bureaucrats, at which point the film turns into the unsurprising-yet-gratifying apocalyptic revenge-flick. At the end of the whole mess, the Director³⁸ informs the two teenagers that the monsters will destroy the entire world unless the two sacrifice themselves willingly: “You can die with the world or for the world,” she informs her lab-rats. And here is the problem for the viewer: hardwiring compels us to believe that, to quote *The Wrath of Khan*, “the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.” But then we remember the lab coats making bets and rooting for a girl under death sentence to bare her tits, and the Director’s ethical repackaging of slaughter as noble sacrifice begins to stick in our craw. The surviving teens, too, will have none of it. And so the Director’s moral appeal goes down like a lead balloon, and the survivors decide that a world in which humans are capable of the deliberate slaughter of others, even in the ‘cause’ of human survival, should go down in flames. Apocalypse now, they say. “Let someone else have a shot.”

³⁸ Played by Sigourney Weaver. In typical horror cross-film self-referentiality, Weaver’s image signals the viewer that even *Alien*’s Ripley, that rare proponent of humane behavior, has changed sides. Formerly a killer of monsters in defense of humanity, she now manages monsters by feeding them humans; from her abject position as conscientious objector and worst pain in the Company’s tail, she has moved directly into its top job.

And where are we, the audience, in all this? Obviously, our *identification* (allegiance) is with the embattled teenagers, but equally obviously, we are *identified* (aligned) with the lab-coated jerks behind the screen. Like these watchers, we are following, on a screen, the spectacle of teenagers being gorily killed. Like the watchers, we take bets on their survival chances and the order of their deaths, and, perhaps, some of us are also waiting to see if the little slut will bare all before being dispatched. But equally obviously, the alignment between the viewers of the film and the lab-coated watchers is not total since viewers of the film are observers of both scenarios, the one in the cabin and the one in the lab. The guilt question arises immediately: if viewers, somehow missing the rather obvious point that they—the watchers outside of the film—are aligned with the watchers within the film, treat these characters as distinct from themselves, they might not go so far as to examine their own complicity and guilt. But they would certainly still wonder why *the watchers inside* don't feel any. If these characters appear as too stupid and arrogant to feel fear before the monsters descend upon them, guilt is even less of an issue: they are absolutely and resolutely amoral, refusing to accept the 'reality' of the kids in the cabin just as viewers refuse to accept the 'reality' of the characters in a horror film. Viewer attitudes towards the watchers might well be determined by these two 'lacks': their lack of fear and their lack of guilt. We want them to feel fear, certainly: but this—wanting to watch their fear, wanting to watch them being punished—is a low impulse (which the film is happy to satisfy, in spades). Surely the more moral viewer impulse would be wanting the watchers in the film to experience *guilt*: if fear represents mere punishment, guilt would be a moral response. If they (or we) cannot be made to feel this, then it really is time for the apocalypse, to "Let someone else have a shot." A guilt-free world is not worth saving.

There are fleeting instances in the film that indicate what it would take to really save the world. A white-coat expresses a brief moment of faux compassion for a girl being mauled by a zombie (“I almost feel sorry for her,” is his not-very-heartfelt comment). One black (!) man refuses to participate in the betting and looks a bit squeamish, but stops well short of protest or rebellion. A white woman (!) hesitantly places her bets and stalls the proceedings by pointing out repeated technical problems—her way, perhaps, of asking whether this is really the only way. (All the white men in the film, incidentally, are completely untroubled by pangs of guilt or squeamishness, however short-lived.) The obvious question to viewers of the film is whether we can do a bit better. To the guys in the white coats, saving the world means placating the monsters by blood sacrifice; to us, perhaps, saving the world would take just one person saying: “I feel guilty about this. Let’s call it off,” and acting on this impulse. But nobody ever does: in a gang culture, individual choices don’t apply. And to the extent that the film aligns viewers outside of the film with the watchers inside, it clearly presumes that on the outside nobody would, either: that viewers, like watchers, might feel the slightest twinge of guilt, but hardly enough for more than a bit of hemming and hawing. Like so many horror films do, *Cabin* simultaneously takes its revenge on viewers for not experiencing guilt—by aligning them with the film’s most despicable characters—and offers them a cop-out—by way of viewer identification (moral allegiance) with the victims.

Forcing us into the killer’s perspective invites us to enjoy the violence, which—if we do—makes us feel guilty. In other words, horror film forces us to experience a guilt in *particular* (guilt for enjoying the destruction of another human being) that we should be feeling in *general* (guilt for destroying the environment, for example). Or, to turn this on its head, the horror film is payback for our failure to feel

guilty for the social, economic, political and ecological horrors we inflict on the world and its inhabitants, particularly children. For our failure to feel guilty about being *social* predators, the horror film forces us into the role of a *physical* one.

The way the horror film induces guilt is by *splitting* alignment from allegiance, or, to use the more common terms, visual ‘identity’ from viewer ‘identification.’ The horror film is the only cinematic genre that routinely forces audience alignment with a character with whom most people cannot possibly identify—that of the killer—and locates identification, however half-heartedly, elsewhere, with either the victim or the hero. Watching horror films is like watching a reportage on the Iraq war while crying crocodile tears: if we voted for Bush or Blair, if we haven’t spent every second of the second Iraq war on the streets protesting against it, we will most likely feel responsible for it, define ourselves, at least to some degree, as the guilty party, as the armchair perpetrators of that war. But our moral allegiance (‘identification’) with the victims sublimates our guilt to the extent that it can no longer spur us into action.³⁹

This is what the horror film does: it confronts us, simultaneously, with our guilt *and* our mechanisms of suppressing guilt sufficiently to avoid acting upon it. *Alignment is the horror film’s method of showcasing our guilt; allegiance is the horror film’s version of crocodile tears.*

Coda: Violence

Finally, a speculative question: is it possible to view the extreme violence of many horror films as the genre’s response to the fact that viewers tend to be

³⁹ Dika, who views the horror film’s main concern as fear rather than guilt, has nevertheless hit very close to the mark in one passage: “the involvement with evil, from the necessary distance of innocence, is specifically formulated into the identification mechanism of the films. The identification with the killer’s look allows direct involvement, while the moral identification with the heroine absolves the viewer of guilt” (*Games of Terror* 129).

understandably obtuse about their own guilty involvement? Of course, violence can simply be shrugged off by pointing at the obvious delights of titillation (not exactly a cheery view of the human race, that). But reading horror films as guilt trips might give us a different perspective on violence. If, as I suspect, the horror film as a genre attempts to make us aware of the guilt we should be feeling but aren't, it runs constantly counter to our persistent determination *not* to go there. Clearly, a gentle hint will not do, and so the horror film hits us over the head with a hammer. Or a chain saw. Or an axe. Or a machete. Or, in the classic kill-someone-else-or-die-plot, with a timed iron mask-contraption that will rip your face open unless you unlock it with the key hidden in your cellmate's digestive tract—really, why stop there? Violence might be the horror film's way of hacking away at its audience to engage with guilt. Admit who you are. Admit what you did.

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