Andrea Sauchelli, “Horror and Mood”

**Introduction**

AS is trying to work out what is **distinctive** and **essential** to horror, and not only in film, but in music, poetry, painting, sculpture and literary fiction. His focus is on “clarification of the concept of art-horror.” [p40Lt]

What they have in common: “…they share a **variable set of rhetorical devices designed to elicit a specific mood**.” [my emphasis] [p40Lt]

In this article he does three things:

First: Discussion of an Alternative Theory: Noël Carroll’s, which says that horror films use specific entities (e.g, supernatural monsters) to produce a specific emotional reaction.

Second: How **mood** differs from **emotion** (**AS’s** theory focuses on **mood**, and this requires that he distinguish **mood** from **emotion**)

Third: Gives an account of art-horror in terms of “the capacidty of works of horror to elicit a specific mood and a specific attention toward generally unpleasant issues.”[p40Lm]

Finally: Explains why horror is a valuable style/genre of art.

**I. Art-Horror and Monsters**

Distinction: art-horror vs. natural-horror.

Art-Horror = cross-media genre/style in the category of art.

Natural-Horror = horrific real events or situations that do not fall into the category of art-horror.

Examples of Art-Horror: a) shockumentaries (*Faces of Death, Traces of Death*)

These include real footage of gruesome deaths, but the actual event recorded in such footage constitutes Natural-Horror.

JP Question: given this claim, what could explain the difference between real footage

of events that were *in themselves* Natural-Horror, and the status of *Faces of Death* as

an instance of Art-Horror?

Carroll’s Theory

NC defines horror “in terms of emotional reaction [fear and disgust]that the audience is supposed to have when exposed to unnatural monsters.”[p40Lb]

What makes the monsters ‘unnatural’: a) actual existence of the monster is ‘not acknowledged

by science; b) disgust reactions to them is “due to their impurity” [where “impurity” =

“a violation of certain categories by which we categorize our experience”] {they are

Interstitial in the sense that they exist in a place somewhere between the real world as

we understand it and ourselves}].

Example: zombies(because the dead do not ‘walk the earth’)

What are emotional reactions? “bodily agitations and modifications” that are “intentional, that

is, they are directed at objects.”; these agitations and modifications are individuated and distin-

guished by a correlated cognitive component.

Key: two emotions (love and fear) are only distinguishable because of beliefs associated

with the cause of the bodily agitation/modifications (“They are attractive” for love,

“The monster is somehow threatening and impure.” [p41Lt]

Objections to Carroll’s Theory (to which NC’s theory is vulnerable because he treats his theory as **descriptive** rather than **an attempt to reform our idea of what counts as Art-Horror**.

A) Films like *A Serbian Film* (2010) .in which there are scenes of explicit sex and decapitation, but none of the characters are ‘supernatural’.

There are multiple examples of films that lack monsters but are regarded by viewers as horror films: Shockumentaries like *Traces of Death*, or *Stalker*.

B) Paintings like Francis Bacon’s, music from death metal bands like Carcass, Cannibal Corpse, Mayhem (music is especially resistant to NC’s theory because music is “not representational” and hence cannot actually *include a monster* the way a film or literary fiction can.

What Saves NC’s Theory

It covers a subset of Art-Horror films very well (*Alien, The Fly, The Thing*, *The Host*).

**2. Moods** (wherein AS offers his alternative account of Art-Horror)

**Moods vs. Emotional States**

Some Examples

Depression, elation, anxiety love, hate, fear,

feeling content anger

Differentiating Features

Not object-directed Object-directed

Longer-lasting hate, fear anger

“background states” foreground states

Preparatory states that orient us

toward a particular emotion

But: some moods can be influenced

by a particular emotion (“love cures all”)

AS thinks that the ‘preparatory’ function of mood states captures an important contribution of moods generated by Art-Horror: “to set the ‘affective’ background of the spectator for what is to follow.”[p42Rt]

The background affective state includes fear and/or disgust, but it also creates an **atmosphere of tension**.

Pylyshyn & Sizer: moods not only prepare us for certain emotions, they change “how we characterize things” (JP: so a mood can set in motion a cognitive change reflected in resulting expectations/interpretations of events. [p42Rlm/b]

**3. Horror and H-mood**

AS’s Theory of Art-Horror:

Work *w* is an instance of Art-Horror iff. *W* is designed to evoke a specific H-mood using

the artistic means peculiar to the form of art to which *w* belongs

**Addendum:** H-mood is one “evoked in representational arts by a morbid attention toward (principally) death, murder, and evil…”[p43Lt/m])

Among the medium-specific effects that generate H-moods for Art-Horror Films, *mise-en-scène* (=”the setting or surroundings of an even or action”) is crucial since this generates so much of the **tone** of a film, and obviously **tone** directly generates **mood** insofar as mood is as much affective atmosphere as anything else!

Examples in Film:

*Alien:* a ‘suffocating atmosphere’ (humans trapped in closed space with walls and ceiling *too close*, much of which is *dimly or completely unlit*).

*Dawn of the Dead:* the music *Profondo Rosso* contributes to an atmosphere of dread.

*Psycho:* the music in the shower scene (the piercing violins in rhythm with the slashing knife)

AS’s best reason for preferring **mood** over **emotion** in accounting for Art-Horror: “based on the idea that the details that generate a certain atmosphere, rather than the metaphysicadl features of the protagonists or monsters, are the elements that enable us to characterize a work of art as an example of horror.”

JP: Discuss the features of *Vertigo* that generate atmosphere (all over the place) versus those that generate “metaphysical features of the protagonists or monsters”.

AS thinks that because **mood** is mainly determined by features of an artform that generate *atmospheric effects,* Art-Horror is more like a style than a genre (where genre involves content-related features that must be present for the kind of artwork involved to fall in its particular category).

JP to class: Consider the following genres and explain what is required for each: thriller, romance, drama, heist, comedy, western, action. Then discuss what similar features might be present in Art-Horror, and see if AS’s claim here is correct.

AS’s account of **H-Mood**

“H-mood is characterized by as feeling of tension related to a morbid inclination of our attention toward a set of unpleasant aspects of reality that, in the case of horror, include mostly death, murder, and evil forces.”

This account requires a clear distinction between expressing a mood or emotion and evoking a mood or emotion. The difference seems to be that a element of an artwork that expresses an emotion or mood just represents that emotion or mood. In these cases, the listener/viewer/reader need not come to *experience that mood of emotion* in response to its representation in the artwork. Whereas, an artwork one that evokes the emotion or mood *generates in the listener/viewer/reader* that selfsame emotion or mood.

AS’s theory is formulated “in terms of what the work is supposed to *evoke* in the audience.”[p44Rt]

The Cognitive Side of Art-Horror (according to AS)

It represents or arouses ideas or real objects “that are related to death, monsters, or other possibly threatening supernatural events (i.e., the coming of the anti-Christ, murder, or evil entities).” This is all about how we *understand* or *are encouraged to think about/interpret* the significance and nature of the events and circumstances we encounter in the artwork. Hence it concerns *cognition* (processing that involves thought/interpretation/judgment/belief).

AS on the Paradox of Horror

The issues (death, monsters, threatening supernatural events, murder, evil entities, etc.) that are aroused in the cognitive side of horror “are associated with experiences that, at first approximation we have good reasons to avoid.” Given that fact, **why would we choose to experience them**, and even be **drawn to them?** It seems to be a psychological conundrum (much like the practices of S&M).

Criticisms of AS Account of Art-Horror

It includes things that wouldn’t be Art-Horror.

AS’s Defense: yes, but that is part of his point: “…my account is intentionally broad to include the possibility of recognizing many different subgenres: horror/thrillers, slasher movies, violent exploitation films, and possibly also works of religious art.”[p45Rt]

“…what my theory is meant to emphasize is the possibility of recognizing a family resemblance among samples of art-horror, thereby providing criteria for the artistic success of those works that can be properly classified as horror.”[p46Lt]

**On the Paradox of Horror**

Insofar as we can account for P of H by pointing to “[t]he fact that humans have a tendency .. to enjoy painful or disgusting artistic and non-artistic experiences” should simply be noted as a starting point for the philosopher … [but] … an explanation of such a seemingly innate tendency should be left to psychology or evolutionary theory (or both).”[p46Lm]

Reasons to Value Art-Horror

AS gives 5 explanations that account for and assert the value of Art-Horror.

#1: Allows us to experience affective states that we would be fortunate to never experience in ‘real life’ is valuable in itself.

#2: Encountering representations of fearful things (like death) that are beyond our control is valuable since it helps us cope with and address those fears.

#3: There is aesthetic pleasure in experiencing the *way* that an artwork *conveys* situations of pain and despair, a world of suffering, etc. (e.g.: David Lynch’s masterful evocation of a waking nightmare in *Mulholland Drive* is beautifully put together [cinematography, acting, etc.])

#4: Painful art contributes to disconnecting the classic association between pleasure and beauty (where some have objected that this does *not* mean that art that evokes pain is ugly, but rather that experience of artworks that evoke pain are not *opposite* those that evoke pleasure, but are “parts of a dense and complex phenomenon” [one sign of which is that evoked pain and fear are *experience intensifiers*]).

#5: Painful art is “faithful to our real human condition” (and therefore respond to that human interest in artistic representations of actual human experience, including painful and fearsome ones).