Berys Gaut, “The Paradox of Horror”

The Paradox of Horror involves what appears to be a set of true propositions that seem to entail a conclusion that conflicts with the belief that we do not enjoy intrinsically unpleasant emotions:

1. Some of us enjoy horror fictions.

2. Horror fictions characteristically produce fear and disgust in their audience.

3. Fear and disgust are intrinsically unpleasant emotions.

Conclusion: We enjoy intrinsically unpleasant emotions.

Approaches to explaining this paradoxical result:

a. It is just true that we enjoy intrinsically unpleasant emotions.

b. There is some *other* feature of the situation that is the *true source* of our enjoyment and it is *not the negative emotions*.

There are various versions of (b).

(b-1): Noël Carroll’s ‘cognitivist’ solution: we take pleasure in satisfying our curiosity about what will happen once the ‘horror situation’ is in place, a situation that stimulates our desire to *comprehend* something that seems incomprehensible (that the ‘monster’ is *possible* though it *seems* ***impossible*** and contradicts our standing conceptual/cultural model of the world [what Carroll calls our ‘categorial schemes’]).

(b-2): the Expressivist solution (tc)

Gaut will show that (a) is the correct response to the so-called **paradox** and will criticize *both* options that take (b) as the way to ‘solve’ the paradox. His preferred account will turn on evidence he presents to show that we **can** enjoy negative emotions.

**I**

Anthropologist Mary Douglas was the source of NC’s approach to explaining the pleasure in entertaining horror fictions: while works of horror ‘generate fear and disgust’ because monsters violate our categorial scheme, things that violate our categorial scheme evoke curiosity and fascination, and the **latter** is what is pleasurable about entertaining them.

NC adds to the Douglas account that in a horror narrative, the ‘gradual series of revelations’ structure of the narrative generates audience interest in whether the fictional characters will come to believe the monster exists, and then whether they will be able to destroy it and restore order, etc.

Since exercise of our curiosity is pleasurable (it *feeds our fascination in strange things* while also offering the prospect of the *removal of the challenge to our categorial scheme*), and the *monster must be entertained* to experience that curiosity and cognitive effort to explore our fascination, there is no paradox. It is just that something enjoyable is combined with and dependent on the existence of something disgusting/fearsome/etc.

JP: perhaps this is just *excitement at the prospect of danger* (the *thrill* in putting oneself in danger would be the purest form of this, perhaps?). But **this danger** is only fictional and hence less problematic than being in **actual danger**.

Gaut’s Objections to NC:

1) not all horror fictions involve monsters.

Slasher fictions involve *all too real* antagonists (psychopaths, serial killers, etc.)

NC responds: but psychopaths have supernatural powers (Gaut: but then the ‘violation of a categorial scheme’ is equivalent to an appeal to the merely unusual with unexpected features of these monster-like antagonists and yet we *don’t* find the unusual *disgusting* or *fearsome*, per se).

Concrete example (*The Silence of the Lambs*) from Gaut puts paid to NC’s answer to the problem that an antagonist like Hannibal Lecter poses for his explanation of our pleasure in horror fictions (Lecter is a *familiar type of human:* one that *takes pleasure in disgusting things* like eating other human beings!).

Gaut: “Carroll’s appeal to monsters disguises the simple point that we can be disgusted by and afraid of human beings because they do evil and awful things, and no mention of monsters or of categorial violations is needed to explain our reactions.” [p334b]

Final riposte: the disappointed horror enthusiast who finds a horror fiction “not scary enough.” “On Carroll’s view [this disappointed horror enthusiast] mu9st really be complaining that his curiosity wasn’t heightened enough. But that is not what he says, and indeed, he might say that the film was quite interesting”…**just not SCARY ENOUGH**.

A simpler explanation for our disappointed horror enthusiast would be that they were deprived of the enjoyment that comes from being scared!

**II**

The Expressivist Solution to the P of H:

Negative emotions are **upsetting** but when these emotions are expressed through the characters in a horror fiction, this helps you to first have and then be relieved of the unpleasant emotions (presumably because there is a process of ‘make believe’ involved that distances us from the most-intense version of fear/disgust).

This is a modified version of Aristotle’s *catharsis* theory of tragedy: we are drawn to tragic stories because it allows us to have an emotional experience in which we *expunge* certain very common human anxieties/fears by experiencing the arc of a tragic tale. We are not ourselves subject to the loss of everything we hold dear, but witnessing this happen to others allows us to work through our own anxieties and fears that this could happen to US.

JP: This seems to lean a bit heavily on the idea that the *fictional nature* of the tale gives us a psychological shield that allows us to *entertain a catastrophic outcome* without reinforcing our anxieties (in the way that desensitization therapy can help someone overcome PTSD [which seems to work because our fears say we are **going to die now** but our actual experience in the **fearsome situation** evoked by the therapy **does not kill us!**).

Gaut’s primary objection to Expressivist Account: a) people don’t say things like “I’m scared, so I think I should go see a horror film”; b) many horror fictions leave a lingering sense of fright after the fiction has ended and we are ‘back to our normal, nonfictional life’.

**III**

Gaut cuts to the chase: rather than look at all the variations of cognitivist and expressivist solutions to the paradox, why not just **show that it can be pleasurable to feel afraid, disgusted**?

Gaut’s alternative: The **Enjoyment Theory**: “horror attracts because people can enjoy being scared and disgusted.” [pg336b]

Gaut notes that one thing that especially favors the Enjoyment Theory is that a) the “self-conscious aim” of a horror fiction is to generate fear and disgust, and b) most horror fictions are lacking in any serious artistic worth, i.e., they are **pure entertainment**.

JP: …. Like candy bars! And there is nothing paradoxical about eating candy!

Gaut’s Suzy Case explicitly appeals to my suggestion that the prospect of being in danger is attractive to many (sky-diving, base-jumping, free rockclimbing, rollercoasters, skateboarding without helmet down 9th street!).

Other negative emotions we enjoy:

Disgust (John Waters’ *Pink Flamingos*)

Anger (people going on Twitter to find a tweet that infuriates them so they can have the *fun* of being mad as hell and not-taking-it-any-more!)

Melancholy: watching an extremely sad tale so you can have a good cry.

But this strategy (appealing to empirical facts like these to show that the primary assumption of the **P of H** is false [that negative emotion *can be enjoyed*]) can be overcome through redescribing these cases (as Carroll does with roller coaster rides in which it is not the queasiness one feels in the ride, but the novelty involved in moving through space in an unusual manner, and the thrill of the ride).

**Two Theory-Types to Account for Enjoying Negative Emotions**

Control Thesis (Morreall): we can enjoy negative emotions if we are in control of the situation that produces them. For real-life cases: A sky-diver ‘learns the ropes’ that protect them from the worst outcomes of skydiving, etc. For horror-fiction cases: we can look away, we don’t have to entirely suspend disbelief, after all it is just a movie, etc.

Gaut rejects CT because: it leaves mysterious how *choosing* to experience a negative emotion *makes it pleasurable* **and** the proponent of the view that such emotions are *intrinsically negative* will insist that any emotion that *isn’t unpleasant* cannot be correctly taken to fall under any *pleasant category of emotion*.

**IV**

The Walton-Neill Theory: denies that negative emotions **are** intrinsically unpleasant. This approach to defending the enjoyment of negative emotions turns on identifying the proper **object** that is **unpleasant**. They say that it is **not the emotion** that is unpleasant, but the **object that provokes** the emotion that is. As Neill says, “…it’s the situations rather than the emotions which are distasteful or undesirable, which we (metaphorically?) describe as painful or unpleasant.”

Gaut finds this approach problematic since what seems to be unpleasant about the *object* (consider the death of a loved one) seems to *necessarily* be also about the emotion we feel in relation to that object.

Gaut proceeds to try to salvage the Walton-Neill approach in the next section.

**V**

Gaut and Walton overcome the objection to the Walton-Neill solution by advancing a revised Humean thesis about negative emotion: they claim that Hume was **wrong** to suppose that negative emotions “essentially involve feelings of pain.” Rather, a negative emotions are **negative**, but not because the feelings are unpleasant, but because of the negative evaluative thoughts they incorporate.

JP: So Gaut is reintroducing a role for cognition in the experience of negative emotion. It rejects the traditional view of the emotions “as phenomenologically characterized feelings.”

Gaut appeals to the ‘dominant modern theory of emotions … [that] … holds that emotions are cognitive, essentially incorporating evaluations.”[pg340m]

On this modern theory of emotion “to fear something involves evaluating it as threatening, to be angry with someone involves evaluating her actions as wrong, to be sorrowful involves thinking that a loss has been suffered, and so on.” [pg340m/b]

JP: This approach depends on making sense of the claim that “…there is no phenomenal character to a thought *per se*”. [pg3480b]

Upshot: “Since we can disvalue something without finding it unpleasant, it follows that it is possible to find both negative emotional responses *and* their objects pleasant.”

JP NOTE: the rest of the article is dealing with some technical features of how to think about what ‘evaluation’ entails, and what to do about obvious empirical differences in how the *majority* of people experience negative emotions pursuant to a horror fiction, and how *some* people experience them, and this is because it is a *merely contingent question* whether the *evaluation that a horror fictional object makes the emotion associated with its experience* ***negative*,** will or will not produce an **unpleasant feeling** in any particular individual.

This resolves the **P of H** and leaves differences in how people *usually* experience negative emotions up to empirical psychological study, rather than a source of data that must conform to the situation originally described as **requiring the existence of a Paradox of Fiction**.