

ABANDON ALL HOPE: Sublime Horror Film and Pessimistic Liberation

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In a darkened cinema, cadaverous images flash on screen, and speakers shriek with the sounds of violins. Within these fictions, creatures crawl and slither, nature itself takes on a violent air, and vulnerable human selves transform into enigmatic entities. Shoulders tense and faces grimace as audience members grapple with the horrors onscreen. The parts of the viewers that have been sympathetically projected onto the characters are invaded and mutated by the narrative, while their physical bodies remain miraculously intact. In a kind of vicarious cognitive exercise, the audience has been subjected to the horrors at the fringes of our world, while maintaining a safe enough distance to call this activity “fun.”

Like looking at the distant misty mountains from the apex of another,¹ we look out into the worlds of horror with a sense of overwhelming powerlessness, but there is also immense satisfaction at

¹See Caspar David Friedrich’s 1818 painting *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*—perhaps the most popular visual reference when philosophers teach the sublime.

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witnessing such a sight and contemplating it *ad infinitum*. This is essentially the view espoused by most philosophers who study the sublime. Typically, what philosophers consider sublime is something whose vastness threatens to cognitively overwhelm the observer; however, the viewer can usually overcome this terrifying, boundless sight through philosophical thinking. I will challenge this traditional view inasmuch as it exalts the humanity of the spectator. As I will argue, there may be a kind of sublime in which the Ego is chipped away at or dissolved, leaving the difference between subject and object—spectator and horrific image—murkier than most would hope. We may feel joyous at the sea of fog and empowered through the functions of our human reasoning, but a similar kind of thrill occurs when our rational functions fail us, and the experience is beyond both language and rationality.

First, we must define horror. Philosopher and film theorist Noël Carroll presents his conception of the horror genre and its effects in his seminal book *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart*. Distinguishing horror as an effect of media from horror as a reaction to terrible real-world events, Carroll proposes the term “art-horror” as a label for the emotion that works of horror aim to instill in the audience. He calls art-horror an “occurrent emotional state,” with “both physical and cognitive dimensions” (24). Thus, it is not uncommon to witness visceral reactions from horror viewers, coupled with the cognitive disruptions elicited by the genre. For instance, cinemas playing 1973’s *The Exorcist* handed out “barf bags” or even notified ambulances ahead of screenings in case people fainted (Mellor 70). Other, less extreme examples include: chills, hair standing up on end, jolts or shocks in reaction to “jump scares,” or the need to hide one’s eyes behind their hands.² Horror, therefore, is a genre that is engineered to cause the very emotion that bears its name.

Carroll also proposes that the horror genre is filled, more or less, with monsters—a term meant to be taken broadly and is inclusive of entities that some might hesitate to explicitly label as “monsters.” A monster may be a demon, a human possessed by a demon, a haunted house, a werewolf, an octopus-like creature of Lovecraftian origin, or nearly anything else that is an object of horror in these works of fiction. According to Carroll, monsters have a dual function: they are not only scary, but impure. Objects or beings that are impure are “categorically interstitial, categorically contradictory, incomplete, or formless” (32). The characters of the works,

²For the purposes of this paper, the physical components will take a backseat to the more important cognitive effects of art-horror.

as well as the audience who mirrors the characters' reactions, will "regard [monsters] not only with fear but with loathing, with a combination of terror and disgust" (23). Despite this seemingly unpleasant two-sided effect of monsters, they also attract viewers and are objects of fascination. Their violations of simple categorization make them interesting, and, for all the horror they cause, they are also strangely appealing. Monsters, as objects of horror, possess both attractive and repulsive characteristics, arousing a sense of ambivalence on the part of the spectator and priming them for an experience of the sublime.

Carroll argues that the horror genre emerged roughly around the time of the publication of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in 1818, give or take a few decades (13). This places the genre either within the frame of the Enlightenment or at least shortly after it, since the dates of the Age of Reason are generally considered the length of the eighteenth century (55). The historical overlap of horror and the Enlightenment also means that the era's central thinkers—Descartes, Locke, and the like—would have been fresh on the minds of early horror consumers and writers. While horror is thus construed as a reaction to, or result of, the Enlightenment era, there are also clear predecessors to horror in previous centuries. One notable example is the *Inferno*, with its bestiary of Hellish punishments and creatures. Dante famously wrote that the gate leading into Hell is inscribed with the following:

THROUGH ME YOU ENTER INTO
THE CITY OF WOES,
THROUGH ME YOU ENTER INTO
ETERNAL PAIN,
THROUGH ME YOU ENTER THE
POPULATION OF LOSS. . .
ABANDON ALL HOPE, YOU WHO
ENTER HERE. (25)

If we accept the *Inferno* as a key predecessor to the horror genre, the hope that must be abandoned is pregnant with meaning. We must relinquish, in this case, the hope of understanding, of categorizing, and of the post-Enlightenment hubris that we can tackle any and all experience through scientific philosophy. Dante's venture into Hell is comparable to a deep dive into the genre of horror, or to our more general human fascination with all things unknown and elusive. If we aim to make it out on the other side of "Hell," a certain kind of resignation is required of us. But for everything we give up or suspend for the sake of the horror-viewing, we gain in raw, indescribable experience.

Just as Dante-the-character encounters many tormented souls whose physical punishments are horrific and cognitively unsettling, the horror viewer is cognitively threatened by overwhelming entities and environments, much in the way that Immanuel Kant conceptualized the sublime. However, the viewer is more akin to Dante-the-author in the sense that they have positions of safety with which to examine the horrors presented. From this privileged position, we may taste the terrible delights that run contrary to the “interest of the senses” (Kant 97). In Kant’s words, “provided our own position is secure, [the sublime object’s] aspect is all the more attractive for its fearfulness” (91). This simultaneous attraction and repulsion parallels Carroll’s description of art-horror, wherein disturbance and fascination are effects of the same source—namely, the transgressions of categories of thought (Carroll 188).

The traditional view of the sublime, popularized in aesthetic philosophy by figures like Kant and Burke, is often summoned in works of horror. On this view, a vastness or sense of incomprehensibility floods the observer, but it can be quelled through philosophical contemplation. Kant famously divides the sublime into two main categories: the mathematical and the dynamical. For the former, “the imagination is overwhelmed by spatial or temporal magnitude; the experience is too great for the imagination to ‘take it all in’ at once” (Shaw 80). The dynamical sublime, on the other hand, is associated by Kant with “fear in the face of the overwhelming forces of nature” (Shaw 81). So while the mathematical sublime is concerned with vast intervals of space and time, the dynamical sublime is concerned with natural forces. The sublimity of nature is not a feature inherent to the natural world, as we can discern in any of the numerous cases where nature is perceived as beautiful instead of sublime. Rather, what makes something sublime is our interpretation of it; sublimity is a product of the mind (Kant 86). It is important to note that the potential for sublimity is in everything since the sublime is “[in] reference to our way of thinking” (104).

Take, for instance, the dynamical sublime. Horror films that feature nature as key elements bear striking similarities to the Kantian dynamical sublime, given that nature is positioned as causing fear (Kant 90). At the beginning of 2015’s *The Witch*, as the seventeenth-century Puritan family is banished from civilization and out into the wilderness, the script states plainly that “overwhelming nature envelops them” and that “the presence of the wood is profound, disturbing, ominous” (Eggers 18–19). The English “Gothic Revival,” a key parent to the broader horror genre, is a reaction to the Age of Reason, which championed rationalism as a superior force of explanation to religion. Laura Hubner writes that with the Enlightenment’s change of emphasis arose the “gothic understanding

that too much repression by symmetry and order invites uprising” (53). Repression certainly pervades *The Witch*, with themes of sexual repression, as well as the incessant quelling of religious doubt. In the context of the film, the extremely religious Puritan family is unable to combat or even comprehend the nature of the supernatural presented through the titular witch, a Satanic goat named Black Phillip, and the dark forest. The family’s rigid code of conduct, informed by Puritan ethics and devotion to Biblical law, represses everything considered sinful, which includes certain natural inclinations. Their stifling ethical code makes them unable to bend in the wind of the supernatural, so instead they break and succumb to revulsion or “uprising.” The dynamically sublime nature couples with the supernatural in *The Witch* to create a gothic atmosphere that reminds us of the great cultural shifts established by the Enlightenment.

Writer-director Robert Eggers prefaces his screenplay with a comment that, despite the “utter naturalism” in how the events are portrayed, the film is still “a folktale, a dream. A nightmare from the past” (11). *The Witch* relies heavily on realism (as is evident in the historical accuracy of costume and dialect), yet in the supernatural there is much that remains unexplained and enigmatic. Hubner, in defining the gothic, claims that “the transgressive potential of the gothic resides in the lingering of the past in the present and the understanding the horror arises from within—the home or the self—and thus shatters boundaries between the ‘self’ and ‘other,’ reality and fantasy, the conscious and the unconscious” (53). Gothic transgressions are abundant in *The Witch*; teenage daughter Thomasin is suspected of being a witch herself by her family, and their ostracism ultimately pushes her to embrace witchcraft and sign the book of the Devil as a pact, which is the ultimate betrayal of the puritan identity she had borne. The internal family drama, coupled with the isolated location of their home just outside the gothic, looming forest, certainly demonstrates horror arising from the home and the family members’ sense of identity. Further, this gothic background of the film, which frequently focuses on the harsh conditions of the landscape and the threatening capacity of nature, highlights the natural element of the Kantian dynamical sublime. Fungus-ridden and ruined crops, the enveloping forest, and chilling rainstorms serve in *The Witch* a dual purpose—powerful gothic imagery which assists the horror narrative, and evocations of the sublime in the eyes of the audience.

While the sublime is a useful template for looking into horror films, there is a crucial component of the sublime that is questionable within the genre—that is, the empowerment of the subject. While Kantians would say that the sublime ultimately affirms the human subject, there is another route, which I will label as the “cosmic pessimist” view, that not only

questions the empowerment of the viewer of the sublime but denies any empowerment altogether. Kant's position is that, in cognitively assessing the sublime, we are reaffirming our mental capacities to even understand the sublime object/event by thinking of it. The object/event is cognitively threatening and nearly overpowering, but we ultimately win this battle between subject and object through mental processes like philosophical thinking. On the other hand, the cosmic pessimist would claim that the sublime in the Kantian sense is impossible, since we can never truly grasp the elusive sublime object/event, and any sense of empowerment we may gain from such an experience is merely human pride—anthropocentrism.

Cosmic pessimism is best exemplified in fiction through the works of H.P. Lovecraft. His writings of “cosmic horror” express a pessimistic brand of anti-humanism, wherein even the position of pessimism is too anthropocentric. Instead, a kind of “indifferentism” is proposed, in which humanity is irrelevant to the universe (Thacker, *Tentacles Longer than Night* 125). Expanding upon the legacy of Lovecraft, contemporary philosopher Eugene Thacker writes that cosmic pessimism is “neither subjective nor objective, neither for-us nor in-itself, and instead a pessimism of the world-without-us” (*Cosmic Pessimism* 12). Thacker's world-without-us is a “spectral and speculative world” which aims to view Earth as an impersonal planet, and humans as nothing more than another kind of animal living on its surface (*In the Dust of This Planet* 5–6).

The influence of Lovecraft, in both fiction and philosophy, is clear in the 2018 sci-fi horror film *Annihilation*, based on the novel by Jeff VanderMeer—a novel of “Weird fiction” in the Lovecraftian tradition. According to Lovecraft, a Weird tale must contain a fear of the infinitude of experience itself (Moreland 192), and the intangible and unpredictable nature of *Annihilation*'s alien “antagonist” expresses this sense of infinity. A mark of Weird fiction is that it “introduces specifically epistemological shocks, using the supernatural, the impossible” (Moreland 200). Thus, at least in part, Weird fiction deals with the problems that arise when encountering anything that cannot be rationally explained—an experience beyond words, and even beyond comprehension.

In writing about Weird Cinema, Brian R. Hauser outlines three essential elements of the Weird: dread, the supernatural, and seriousness (Moreland 240). *Annihilation* certainly tackles all three through use of the “discovery plot,” a theme of horror narrative which, according to Carroll, contains “the discovery of the unknown (voluntary or otherwise), the play of ratiocination, and the drama of proof” (126). Discovery plots serve the horror genre by making the narrative enjoyable and engaging to the viewer, as well as introducing philosophical questions, such as the epistemological question of how we obtain information in the first place. In *Annihilation*,

the gist of the plot involves five scientists attempting to understand the terrifyingly ambiguous and swiftly expanding region of land called Area X. Within the confines of “the Shimmer,” (an iridescent wall of refracted light), the DNA of humans, animals, and plants blend together to form ontologically nebulous “monsters,” recalling Carroll’s term. The scientists struggle to understand the effects of the Shimmer and its alien source, making the discovery plot the narrative backbone of the film. This drama of discovery leads to a conclusion that expresses cosmic pessimism and its “indifferentism.” The film’s main protagonist, the biologist Lena, directly confronts the alien source which had already dissolved the very ontological makeup of the other four scientists, an outcome that expresses the great indifference of the universe regarding humanity. When the amorphous alien stands in front of Lena, the former slowly starts to mimic and obtain the physical characteristics of the latter, so that two outwardly identical selves serve as the two sides of the film’s climactic battle. For Lena to get out alive, she must destroy her other “self”—the alien— but the film’s final shot leaves the viewer questioning whether she got out ontologically intact, as her eyes softly shine with the swirling colors of the Shimmer.

In the words of horror writer and adamant pessimist Thomas Ligotti, “[w]hat is most uncanny about the self is that no one has yet been able to present the least evidence of it” (88). *Annihilation*’s scientists all experience some degree of loss of self within the Shimmer, but they also possess their self-destructive tendencies. Whether through substance abuse, self-harm, or intentionally destabilizing one’s marriage, the scientists come into Area X already fragmented in terms of self. The effects of Area X—leaves growing from cut marks on arms, a woman’s scream eternalized in the roar of a bear who killed her, fingerprints swirling on skin—disintegrate the ontology of all living things inside it, their DNA “refracting” like light. The complete disinterestedness of the alien—“I don’t know what it wants, or if it wants” (Garland 1:32:25)—makes the human characters irrelevant to the universe in a way reminiscent of Lovecraft and his cosmic pessimism.

The events and monstrous entities of *Annihilation* are certainly horrifying, but there is also something beautiful in them that evokes a sense of the sublime. While cosmic pessimism and the sublime are at odds in terms of the role of the human spectator, there is a way that they may be combined, leaving the empowerment of the spectator ambiguous. This I will call “sublime horror.” Even if cosmic pessimism denies empowerment to the human subject, there is nevertheless still an element of appeal in cosmic horror, which is evident in the fact that many people continually subject themselves to it. It may be difficult to understand the appeal of such horror and, equally, the appeal of the pessimistic perspective more broadly, but Ligotti makes a case for such a pessimistic outlook: “tragedy as

entertainment performs a crucial function—that of coating the spattered nothingness of our lives with a veneer of grandeur and style, qualities of the theatrical world and not the everyday one” (154). It may not be the most uplifting route, but there is solace in the aesthetic. Ligotti in this case sounds quite like Schopenhauer in his insistence that art is the only pure comfort in life, the only escape from suffering. Regarding the sublime, Schopenhauer writes:

If we lose ourselves in contemplation of the infinite greatness of the universe in space and time, meditate on the past millennia and on those to come; or if the heavens at night actually bring innumerable worlds before our eyes, and so impress on our consciousness the immensity of the universe, we feel ourselves reduced to nothing; we feel ourselves as individuals, as living bodies, as transient phenomena of will, like drops in the ocean, dwindling and dissolving into nothing. . . . The vastness of the world, which previously disturbed our peace of mind, now rests within us; . . . we are one with the world, and are therefore not oppressed but exalted by its immensity. (147)

The positive effect of the sublime, the “exaltation beyond our own individuality” (147), is clear. The individual self need not be positively affirmed to experience the sublime in such a way as to make the experience worthwhile. The advantage of sublime horror, therefore, is the unity of the human with the world—a quasi-Eastern perspective of Oneness that Schopenhauer embraced—through a kind of negation of the human self.

Expanding upon Lovecraft’s “universe without a formula,” Ligotti further states that “the human race is what it always has been in this or any other world—irrelevant, which is as liberating to some as it is maddening to others, including Lovecraft’s characters” (196). This type of “liberating” knowledge, I propose, fulfills the same kind of function as the affirmation of the human subject in the Kantian sublime, albeit in a negative manner. Accepting the irrelevance of the human subject and the impossibility of pure thought (thought that is unburdened by our human framework and able to achieve objectivity), as Thomas Ligotti and Eugene Thacker do, provides a kind of freedom that is almost comforting: a subversive affirmation. Or, in Thacker’s words, it is “to experience estrangement to such a degree that it almost becomes tranquility” (*Infinite Resignation* 72).

Sublime horror encompasses plenty of horror films in the 21st century. Through comparative philosophy, it is tempting to conjecture that this trend stems from the nihilism of modernity, as certain Eastern philosophers would claim, such as those of the Kyoto School.

Japanese philosopher Nishitani Keiji believed that nihilism, or “relative nothingness,” is the realization of our existence as without foundation. All of our human institutions and rules are futile attempts to grasp the “abyss of meaninglessness and hopelessness” (Carter 91-2). Nihilism appears as a contemporary phenomenon, a sort of hangover from the Enlightenment; we discovered ways of gathering data and using rationality to our advantage, but for all this advancement, we still must grapple with utter meaninglessness. The horror genre, too, was born in the era following the Enlightenment and the disillusionment that it awoke. It is therefore natural that nihilism and horror should have such a close intertwining, given their shared historical origin. Nihilism pervades modernity, and horror is surely the genre best capable of exploring this terrain in fiction. Perhaps horror fiction, and art more generally, can give us a kind of solution to the problem of nihilism, as Schopenhauer suggested.

Take one last example of a sublime horror film addressing such topics as nihilism and pessimism: 2018’s *Hereditary*, a supernatural horror film centered on grief and family trauma, carries at its basis a fatalism reminiscent of the aforementioned cosmic pessimists. In a scene of meta-narrative importance, the teenage son Peter Graham idly sits in an English class, where his teacher poses the question of whether the characters of Sophocles’ tragedy had agency. “Is it more tragic if it’s inevitable than if the characters had agency?” asks the teacher, to which a student answers off-screen, “I think it’s more tragic—because if it’s all just inevitable, that means the characters have no hope and that they never had hope, because they’re just like pawns in this horrible, hopeless machine” (*Hereditary* 0:15:23). In the universe of *Hereditary*, the characters are themselves pawns—puppets, even—to the greater scheme of a demon-worshipping cult with its eyes set on the Graham family. This theme is expressed visually through multiple scenes of the family’s mother, Annie, carefully crafting doll-like miniatures of scenes from her family’s life. Annie’s workshop even contains a miniature of the Graham family house, which blends seamlessly into the family’s real home in the film’s opening shot. *Hereditary* is a prime example of what Thomas Ligotti calls the ultimate paradox—the human puppet (xxi). The cruel irony is that puppets do not believe they are puppets but rather assume that they have agency, in the same way that the Graham family struggles to understand why supernatural and fatalistic horrors intrude upon the safety of their home and disrupt their lives. Even the phrase “human puppet” expresses an ontologically and categorically contradictory position, once again recalling Noël Carroll’s monsters of horror. The Graham family’s destruction in the face of supernatural horrors demonstrates cosmic pessimism; they, as mere humans, are relevant only to the extent that they may be used by demonic forces, and their individuality

or sense of self is entirely irrelevant to the “indifferentism” of the universe. Human puppets, indeed.

A film like *Hereditary* is not empowering in the sense of the traditional Kantian sublime, but it does fit what I propose as sublime horror. Like *Annihilation*, *Hereditary* allows the viewer to imagine a dissolution of the self in the wake of an indifferent universe. While deeply unsettling, sublime horror provides a kind of liberation and tranquility, in part because of the strange attractiveness of such transgressive categories and the undermining of thought, and partially because the aesthetic experience itself, with its safety from the physical dangers of the narrative, allows for some degree of enjoyment, as Schopenhauer noted. Additionally, a brief look at the major tenets of Eastern philosophy shows that nihilism, nothingness, non-being, and the loss of Ego are common themes. Ligotti notes that, in Schopenhauer’s view, “Buddhism may advertise as truth what no pessimist can prove—that suffering is basic to human existence” (Ligotti 118). If we embrace the Schopenhauerian claim that “Buddhism is pessimism,” we can find a lot to gain from Eastern insights, particularly in matters in which our Western ontological conceptions are threatened. Sublime horror allows for the possibility of a sort of enlightenment, as conceptualized by Eastern philosophy, as well as the pure aesthetic gratification that makes art-horror appealing. It may not be readily apparent that films like *Hereditary* contain insight into Eastern philosophy, but this path is opened up by the genre’s undermining of traditional Western philosophy, where simple concepts like “a person = one body + one mind” (Cartesian dualism) are questioned through narrative devices such as demon possession. Sublime horror, on this Eastern view, may just be able to tackle the modern problem of nihilism through its unification of the spectator and the larger world, giving us “meaning” through works of fiction.

To reiterate, the films I have discussed should make several points clear. First, they are candidates for the philosophical genre that I call sublime horror, through their examinations of selves, their depictions of experience which surpasses the boundaries of language and thought, and the liberating subversion of the human spectator’s sublime empowerment. Secondly, the audience, via the aesthetic experience of emotional and cognitive mimicry of the fictional characters, encounters terrifying transmutations of what it means to be an individual, human self. While this experience is horrific, it is also alluring because of the fascination we have with anything that transgresses our ordinary conceptual schemata. This duality of repulsion and attraction helps to explain why sublime horror, and any horrific work of fiction in general, receives a certain degree of popularity or appeal. Those dismissive or apprehensive about the genre often neglect this very crucial element of attraction. Thirdly, through interactions with sublime

horror, the audience is intellectually stimulated and experiences thoughts and sensations that are otherwise shunned or repressed in quotidian life. Examples include: the weighty but liberating thought of Ego-dissolution, grief and trauma as an emotional and cognitive exercise free from real physical danger, or the cosmic fascination with entities that so outweigh us in scale as to inspire a sense of human smallness. Lastly, sublime horror offers its own kind of solution to the contemporary plague of nihilism, through offering aesthetics as our entertainer and generator of meaning, and through visualizing a unification of human and external world that makes the desperate search for meaning appear moot.

Noël Carroll gave his defense of the twisted delights of the horror genre when he wrote: “art-horror is the price we are willing to pay for the revelation of that which is impossible and unknown, of that which violates our conceptual schema” (186). On this view, horror is something to be endured for the greater purpose of cognitive expansion. We may shudder at the screams of *Hereditary*’s Graham family as they witness each other succumb to demonic invasion, but the intellectual stimulation is worth the cost. Thomas Ligotti took Carroll’s perspective one step further when he claimed that “those who have gotten a good whiff of other worlds and sampled a cuisine marginal to stable existence will not be able to stay themselves the uncanny feast of horrors that has been laid out for them” (156). Not only is the intellectual challenge appealing, then, but the horror itself is a pleasure as well. Removed from any tangible threat, the aesthetic experience allows for even the most gruesome events to be considered palatable. In a Schopenhauerian sense, we are freed from our personal sufferings, even if we are bearing witness to fictional sufferings.

The sublime has a history in aesthetic philosophy of being described in terms of terror and fear, coupled with sensations of exuberance or dominance. Since Kant’s era, we have been exposed to numerous cultural texts that take this ambivalent or two-sided sublime but retract the pride of dominance that previous centuries proposed. Whether in Shelly’s *Frankenstein*, Lovecraft’s short stories, or recent horror films like *The Witch*, *Annihilation*, and *Hereditary*, the sublime has been exhumed, but its veneer of anthropocentric hubris is discarded. Themes such as our smallness compared to the vast cosmos, our inability to think thoughts outside of the realm of the human, or our terror in the face of advancing climate change are offered in place of the empowerment of the spectator in this new age of the sublime. The Kantian empowerment is subverted, our human individuality and superiority are questioned, but all the while we are still intellectually stimulated and pessimistically liberated. Sublime horror is wildly unsettling, but it is not without its rewards, given that one is willing to embrace them.

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