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The Horror Film and the Horror of Film

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> I will suppose not that God, who is most good and the fountain of truth, but rather some evil genius, at once very powerful and cunning, has bent all his effort to deceive me. I will suppose heaven, air, earth, colors, shapes, sounds and everything external are nothing but the delusions of dreams that he has contrived to lure me into belief. . . . I will resolutely guard against assenting to falsities and against whatever this deceiver can imply to trick me.
>
> René Descartes, *Meditations*

> The eyes of the crow and the eye of the camera open
> Onto Homer's world, not ours. First and last
> They magnify earth, and the abiding
> Mother of Gods and men; if they notice either
> It is only in passing: gods behave, men die,
> Both feel in their own small way, but She
> Does nothing and does not care,
> She alone is seriously there.
>
> W. H. Auden, "Memorial for the City"

I

"The tradition of horror," writes Frank McConnell in *The Spoken Seen*, "as we are coming now to realize, is one of the oldest and most continuous of cinematic genres." That this is so should not surprise anyone who has even a minimal acquaintance with the imaginative life of the West, since terrifying tales are among the most ancient and most persistent stories in our inheritance, perhaps, indeed, in the inheritance of the human subconscious." In fact, McConnell concludes, "a psychic history of culture . . . could be written very efficiently from the morphology of its monsters, the history of those personifications of the void which successive generations have selected as their central nightmares" (136-37).

Paradoxically, any "morphology" of those monsters which the movies have unveiled should now include the movies themselves among possible threatening forms. For the movies, it seems, have convinced at least one theoreticians of the art, Roger Munier, that their impact on human perception will be to displace mankind from its position of preeminence over things, replaced--oh horror!--by the world itself, that is, by the "void"--for the "void" to which McConnell alludes is mankind's name for all he cannot control, for that which "alone is seriously there."

I would like first to put in context and then to explore Munier's startling conception of film. Using it as a viewfinder, I will then examine a single illustrative example of the horror genre--Nicholas Roeg's *Don't Look Now* (1973)--as a film whose horror springs in part from a horror of film.

II

In a sense, the genre of the horror film--if we define such to be all films whose primary effect is to surprise, terrify, or alienate an audience by means of a narrative and cinematic techniques which are disorienting and aggressive, violent or discomforting--is coequal with the history of film itself. For when the Lumiere brothers opened the first movie theatre on December 28, 1895 in the basement of a Paris cafe, a "horror" film was on the bill, though unexpectedly. One of the Lumieres' shorts that day, *L'arrive d'un train en gare*, a simple shot of a railroad train pulling into a station, elicited from that initial audience shrieks of fear as they ducked to avoid the menace they perceived to be hurtling directly at them.

Such fear stemmed in part from the simple fact that the populace had not yet learned to watch movies and was unprepared for withstanding their realism. However, as Noel Burch has reminded, the reaction of that first audience was no mere aberration: for movies have from their inception been perceived as a kind of threat, "a veritable public menace": hence the early and persistent demands throughout their history for censorship of them--for protection of the public against their aggression. And such a reaction is, Burch observes, hardly groundless. For

> Whatever his level of critical awareness, a viewer sitting in the dark alone and suddenly face to face with the screen is completely at the mercy of the filmmaker, who may do violence to him at any moment and through any means. Should the viewer be forced beyond the pain threshold, his defense mechanisms may well be called forth and he may remind himself that "it's only a movie" . . . but it will always be too late . . . the harm will already have been done; intense discomfort, and perhaps even terror, will already have crept across the threshold. (125-25)

Movies, then, are always, at least potentially, horror movies.

As the sophistication of the audience increased, as we learned how to see in a cinematic way, the threshold of terror rose, of course. By 1929, a train pulling into a station was no longer perceived as a menace, and Buñuel and Dali, in *Un Chien Andalou*, had to resort to a razor blade slicing an eyeball to push the viewer past the pain threshold. Now many sophisticated 1980s moviegoers cannot even be scared by the numerous projectiles and appendages thrown at them by a demented slasher in a movie like Friday the 13th, Parts I through VIII, even though the effect of the assault on the audience is heightened by the baroque device of 3D.

It was not, however, just the image of a physical threat which surprised and discomforted the first film viewers. Sadoul has recounted that audiences were powerfully moved by the first cinematic presentations of all sorts of natural movements: the sight of smoke ascending into the sky, waves breaking on a shore, leaves trembling in the wind. In an essay entitled "The Fascinating Image," Roger Munier has attempted to explain the true source of the power those first images had to affect an audience:

> Up to that time one said: the smoke is rising into the blue, the leaves are trembling; or the painting suggests such movements. In the cinema, however, the smoke itself is rising, the leaf really trembles: it declares itself as a leaf trembling in the wind. It is like a leaf that one encounters in nature and at the same time it is much more, from the moment when, in addition to being real, it is also, indeed primarily, a represented reality. If it were only a real leaf, it would wait for my observation in order to achieve significance. Because it is represented, divided in two by the image, it is already signified, offered in itself as a leaf trembling in the wind. (90-91)

Things, as seen in the movies, are thus "photogenic," Munier explains (he borrows the term from Louis Delluc), the "photogenic" being "the self-expression of the world in the image," "that appeal coming to us from the object via the interpretation of its imaginary replica whereby it designates itself as an object," "the sense which things give themselves" (Munier 90). In Delluc/ Munier's concept of the photogenic, I would like to suggest, lies the basis for not necessarily a theory of the horror film, but rather a theory of the horror of film. For Munier's essay is misnamed; it might better be called "The Terrifying Image."

III

That in the movies things have their way with us, that the movies depict an almost inhuman world, such film theorists as André Bazin, Amadee Ayfree, Jean Mitry, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Stanley Cavell, each influenced in some way by phenomenology, have all agreed. To Bazin, the real force of the movies was "centrifugal," focusing not on man but rather throwing him outward into the frontiers of the world beyond the screen (105-107). To Ayfree, the movie image is a seed which produces fruit in man only in order to fertilize that which originally produced it--the world (Andrew 253). For Mitry, the "cinema is a world which organizes itself into a narrative" (Andrew 208). In the view of Merleau-Ponty, movies exhibit a form of perception which enables us to "rediscover a commerce with the world and a presence to the world which is older than intelligence" and which helps us to reestablish "the union of our lived, embodied existence in that world" (52). And to Cavell, the background of all films is the "promise of the world's exhibition" (159). However, to Munier alone, who shares with them all the central conviction that film is a means of access to a world unknown to rational, anthropocentric mankind, the prospect of such cinematic revelation is well-nigh terrifying. As Dudley Andrew has observed, Munier sees the movies as a destructive force, something like atomic energy, the effect of which, once introduced into the world, cannot be undone (248).

Since movies are not really "pictures" at all, not really shaped by the "intimate and reassuring sense we give things," they efface man, Munier explains (90). By presenting for our inspection the "pre-face" of the world which, "resuming its ancestral ascendancy," takes on "cosmophonic" power, the movies seduce us into becoming "shipwrecked" in the image and under the sway of a new logos--the world's and not our own--which controls us (89). Although in the movies, as Andrew summarizes,

> We try with our pathetic film syntax, with our editing and camera placement, to organize discourse or at least a view of the world. . . . it is always the world which has the last word. Forever opaque, it outlives the transparence of human speech. We have created machines and tools which no longer serve us but which serve a world that now commands us.

The movies, Munier claims, take us to "other side of things," but only in such a way that we come to witness:

> the world . . . in its pure state, in the pure projection of its essence, beyond all prehension. The world such as it is would be, if it could be set up as a "world," outside of any dialectical rapport with the human. Such as it would be if it could, in such a solipsistic predication, exclude us from its domain. (87)

We might profitably contrast Munier's point of view with Cavell's summary explanation of his "ontology of film" in The World Viewed:

> A world complete without me which is present to me is the world of my immortality. This is the importance of film--and a danger. It takes my life as my haunting of the world, either because I left it unloved (the Flying Dutchman) or because I left unfinished business (Hamlet). So there is reason for me to want the camera to deny the coherence of the world, its coherence as past: to deny that the world is complete without me. But there is equal reason to want it affirmed that the world is coherent without me. That is essential to what I want of immortality: nature's survival of me. It will mean that the present judgment upon me is not yet the last. (160)

IV

As an epigraph to "The Fascinating Image," Munier quotes these words from Orson

Welles, which he evidently sees as a cogent presentation of his own view on film:

> The camera . . . is more than a recording apparatus, it is a means whereby messages from another world come to us, a world not ours, leading us to the heart of the great secret. (85)

Don't Look Now is certainly a film in which the motion picture camera discovers "messages from another world." All of its viewers and most of its critics find it a terribly, even needlessly enigmatic film. For the film's central character, John Baxter, however, these messages--captured and revealed through cryptic editing and consummate photography--do not lead to the heart of any great secret, though every image in the film hints at its existence, though his final encounter with the secret's emissary at the movie's close causes his brutal death.

If we use Huss and Ross' classification scheme for the horror genre, we might be tempted to characterize *Don't Look Now* as either "gothic" (certainly its setting--Venice--and overall atmosphere qualify it as such) or as "psychological" (on the strength of its demented mass murderer and the importance to the plot of parapsychology). However, let us designate it instead as a "Munierian" horror film. For the real horror of a film like *Don't Look Now* is not merely gothic or psychological; it springs from the impression that an inhuman logos is at loose in the world, a logos which shapes the film--is, in fact, its narrative energy--but to which our perception is not geared. It is this force which makes us unable to "look now."

"The farther I go, the more Byzantine it gets," John Baxter remarks to his wife Laura, as they sit together at lunch the first time we see them in Venice. It is not just the project of restoring a 16th century church to which he refers, however. His perception itself has become Byzantine, and the visible world is consequently transformed into a mosaic he cannot interpret. The world in which he moves throughout the film, even before he journeys to Venice, seems utterly suspicious--imminent. Rain falling on a pond, a smashed mosaic tile, a bishop's handkerchief, rats crawling out of a canal, a child's doll, a bucket of water thrown into the street, all seem numinous, all appear to hint of a "great secret."

John Baxter, however, is unwilling to admit the existence of any such secret. Though he possesses--in the estimate of the blind psychic with whom his fate seems irrevocably intertwined--ESP, "a gift from the good lord who gives all things," he remains, true to his profession as an art restorer, trapped in the maintenance of old ways of seeing, mired in the "picturesque," seeking to restore it and the world view of which it partakes: a comforting, ordered, humanly secured, known, past-tense realm. But Baxter lives, and dies--as the audiences knows, for we see him see and see what he does not understand--that he never just "looks now" but sees through time as well as space; that he sees under the sway of the photogenic, not the picturesque.

In the film's first scene, in which the Baxter's daughter, Christine, drowns in a pond, we see Laura reading a book entitled *Beyond the Plane Geometry of Space* and inquiring of her husband about the reality of the curvature of the ocean's surface. Absentmindedly he replies--as he concentrates on inspection of a slide of the Venetian church he has been hired to reconstitute--that "Nothing is what it seems." The statement is not a testimony to his sense of wonder, however. Cartesian doubt, not wonder, guides him. He will not be lured into acceptance of anything he cannot rationally understand. Though within seconds of his declaration he senses--informed by his own second sight (as the editing makes clear)--that his daughter is in danger and rushes out of the house to try to save her (though too late), it is we, not he, who understand how he knew to come to her aid. Things speak to John Baxter--almost every aspect of the film's decoupage reveals their discourse; yet he does not always know that he hears or reads their logos.

Only in the film's last sequence does Baxter, now alone in Venice, shaken out of his normal skepticism by a series of eerie incidents and coincidences --including seeing his wife, who is supposed to be in England, on a funeral barge--begin to believe that he is in fact being contacted by some irrational force and thus seeks it out. He even comes to suspect--as do his wife and the blind psychic--that his dead daughter may be summoning him.

At a screening of *Don't Look Now*, I witnessed a kind of terror I have seldom seen before in a movie theatre sweep through the audience during the last sequence of the film. As John Baxter runs through the maze-like, fog-shrouded streets of Venice, hard on the track of what he believes to be his daughter returned from the grave, as he finally catches up with the small figure in a red raincoat--identical to the one Christine was wearing when she drowned--only to discover that the being he has sought is a grotesque dwarf with a butcher knife, the audience became nearly frenzied. A veteran of the film myself, I found it more interesting to watch them than the screen, and I was astonished by what I saw. Perfect strangers--the woman on my left, for instance--were reaching out for comfort to each other in the packed theatre, actually grabbing onto the nearest possible person in the hope that their terror might so be relieved.

I do not think it was the content, the plot, or the monster of *Don't Look Now*, which provoked such a reaction. *Don't Look Now* seemed a true horror film that evening for much the same reason the *L'Arrive d'un train en gare* momentarily terrified the Lumieres' audience: because it hinted of another way of seeing, and hence of another world; it spoke of a vision and another side of things to which we are not yet adapted. And Baxter's brutal murder brought screams from that audience because they unconsciously understood it as a movie metaphor for--as Munier would say--being "shipwrecked" in that other world, after having first been seduced into going to sea (see?) by the fascinating, photogenic appeal of the movies.

It is the essence of the horror film, R. H. W. Dillard has observed to teach "an acceptance of the natural order of things and an affirmation of man's ability to cope with and even prevail over the evil of life which he can never hope to understand. . . ." In order to accomplish this, it "sets out to purge us of our fear of death by exposing us to death as we have never seen it before, by distorting the fact of death into all possible contortions to help us see its simple and natural reality" (65). Such acceptance and affirmation, however, are precisely what *Don't Look Now*--and the Munierian horror film--does not teach us. For it implies instead that we can only prevail over that which we understand, that anything beyond the human is potentially evil, that we must not confront the world beyond the humanly imposed "natural"--for beyond is death; it teaches that the image--and hence the imagination--kills; that the "photo-genic" is "photo-lethal." It convinces us that Cartesian voice we still hear admonishing us within not to be deceived or tricked by the world is the one we must heed--for if we do not, we might come face-to-face with that evil genius who lurks within the visible world, wielding a butcher knife.