Carroll on the Emotion of Horror

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Abstract: *Noël Carroll's influence on the contemporary debate on the horror genre is hard to overestimate. His work on the topic is often celebrated as one of the best instances of interdisciplinary dialogue between film studies and philosophy of art. It has provided the foundations for the contemporary study of horror in art. Yet, for all the critical attention that his views on horror have attracted over the years, little scrutiny has been given to the nature itself of the emotion of horror in the genre. This paper offers a critical understanding of the nature of the emotion of horror for Carroll, with a view to informing future investigations into the nature of horror in film (and beyond).*

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1. Introduction

The contemporary literature on horror is one of the best instances of interdisciplinary dialogue between film studies and philosophy of art. The central influence on this literature has for a while been film scholar and philosopher of art Noël Carroll. The main focus of this literature has been the apparent paradox of our deriving pleasure from horrible (fictional) characters and events (this is the so-called 'paradox of horror'). Various criticisms have been raised against Carroll's so-called 'cognitivist solution' to the paradox, and alternative solutions have been proposed.[1] Although Carroll explicitly identifies the horror genre with the affective response that is appropriate to works in the genre, however, little critical attention has been devoted to the nature of this affective state.[2] Following Carroll, the standard story in this respect is that horror fictions warrant a combination of fear and disgust. In his chapter on "Horror" in the *Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film*, for instance, Aaron Smuts presupposes, without ever questioning it, the view that horror

[1] See e.g. Susan Feagin, "Monsters, Disgust and Fascination", *Philosophical Studies* 65 (1992), 75–84, Berys Gaut, "The Paradox of Horror", *British Journal of Aesthetics* 33 (1993), 333–345, and "The Enjoyment Theory of Horror: A response to Carroll", *British Journal of Aesthetics* 35 (1995), 284–289.

[2] The following two essays are exceptions in that they do contain critical discussions of the nature of horror as an affective response: Robert Solomon, "Real Horror", in his *In Defense of Sentimentality* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 108–130, and Andrea Sauchelli, "Horror and Mood", *American Philosophical Quarterly* 51 (2014), 39–50. However, Solomon's essay focuses on the response that is appropriate to real, as opposed to artistic horror. Sauchelli, by contrast, briefly discusses Carroll's view before proposing a radically different view of horror in art as a mood.

fictions warrant fear and disgust.[3] Or, to mention another example, Katerina Bantinaki assumes the same view as "pretheoretical", without any argument or references in its support.[4] And, indeed, from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) to the latest instalment in the Hannibal Lecter saga (*Hannibal*, 2013–2015), many works of horror disgust at the same time as they horrify. In what follows, however, I will offer some critical remarks on Carroll's view of the nature of the affective reaction of horror. In particular, I will unpack the details of his view and provide reasons to reject his understanding of disgust in terms of categorial violation. I will conclude by suggesting that further research is needed on the nature of the appropriate affective response to horror.

2. Art-horror

Carroll characterizes what he calls 'art-horror', i.e. the distinctive emotional response that is appropriate to works of fiction in the horror genre, as a response that is appropriate to horror "monsters".[5] On Carroll's terminology, "monsters" are *actually* (as opposed to fictionally) impossible beings, or beings "whose existence is not countenanced by science".[6] Moreover, *horror* monsters are fearsome and impure. The response of art-horror is modelled on the response that characters in the relevant fictions are described as having when beset by those monsters. Art-

[3] Smuts, *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film*, ed. by P. Livingston and C. Plantinga (Routledge, 2009), 505–514, 505.

[4] Bantinaki, "The Paradox of Horror: Fear as a positive emotion", *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 70 (2012), 383–392, 383.

[5] Carroll's label is somewhat misleading, since it makes reference to art even though his focus is fictions. This can produce areas of ambiguity, since there are horror fictions that are not art and artistic horror that is not fiction (see Sauchelli (2014), 41). However, most artistic horror is indeed fiction and the examples discussed in the literature are almost always works of art.

[6] Carroll (1990), 68. Many have, however, disputed Carroll's claim that monsters are necessary components of horror: see Gaut (1993).

horror is a response to dangerousness and impurity. On the most precise specification of the necessary and sufficient conditions for art-horror that Carroll provides,

> I [as an audience member] am occurrently art-horrified by some monster X, say Dracula, if and only if 1) I am in some state of abnormal, physically felt agitation […] which 2) has been *caused* by a) the thought: that Dracula is a possible being; and by the evaluative thoughts: that b) said Dracula has the property of being […] threatening […] and that c) said Dracula has the property of being impure…[7]

Dangerousness warrants fear, whereas "abomination, nausea, shuddering, revulsion, disgust, etc." are the "characteristic" responses to impurity. Disgust however appears to have a central role, as in the book Carroll predominantly mentions disgust at the expense of all other alleged responses to impurity, e.g. abomination, nausea etc. As a consequence, Carroll concludes, "[a]rt-horror requires evaluation both in terms of threat and disgust".[8]

Note, however, that, in the quoted passage, Carroll refers to the causes of the emotional response. This is misleading as in most other places Carroll formulates his view in terms of evaluation or appropriateness. Although in many cases the cause of an emotion and its intentional object coincide, the two can also come apart.[9] Moreover, as expressed in the above, Carroll's is not so

[7] Carroll (1990), 27.

[8] Carroll (1990), 28.

[9] Consider for example Wendy, who is angry at Bernie because she believes he stole her car, when in fact the thief was Angela. It is possible to construct this scenario in a way that attributes no causal role to Bernie; but Wendy's anger is directed at him (de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion* (MIT Press, 1987), 110 ff).

much a general definition of—or a complete specification of the necessary and sufficient conditions for—art-horror, as it is a characterization of art-horror *in the case in which* a monster is the emotion's intentional object. The scope of the "if and only if" is crucial in this respect: Carroll says "I am … art-horrified *by some monster X* … if and only if…", rather than "I am art-horrified if and only if…" In the passage, Carroll leaves this difference of scope unremarked upon, nor does he appear to put much weight on the difference elsewhere. The difference does matter on the assumption that art-horror is an emotion the features of which vary with the intentional object it is directed to. However, Carroll does not say anything that would suggest that he understands art-horror as variable in this sense.

On a different point, it is tempting to characterize Carroll's view as the view that art-horror is a mixture of fear and disgust. However, Carroll does not take an explicit stance on the characterization of the emotional response of art-horror as: (1) a mixed emotion composed of (some of) the (phenomenological, physiological, evaluative, behavioural etc. aspects of the) two emotions, (2) just the co-occurrence of the two emotions, or, finally, (3) an emotion even more different from fear and disgust than (1) and (2). Instead, his chief preoccupation is with establishing the evaluative cognition that is proper to art-horror: "it is the evaluative components of the theory that primarily serve to individuate art-horror".[10] Indeed, it is difficult to reconstruct which of (1), (2) or (3) Carroll might endorse. If the monsters of horror fictions are both fearsome and disgusting, then fear and disgust would both seem to be emotions elicited in horror. This is so unless the co-occurrence of the fearsome and of the disgusting that is distinctive of horror

[10] Carroll (1990), 28.

somehow cancels out both fear and disgust to leave just the horror. But this is something that Carroll never suggests is happening.

Furthermore, Carroll says that the evidence for his characterization of art-horror comes from the manifestations of emotional responses that the characters of horror fictions display. For instance, he says, "I found expressions and gestures of disgust as a regularly recurring feature of characters' reactions in horror fictions".[11] This suggests that fear and disgust are emotional responses appropriate to horror fictions, alongside art-horror. Indeed, given the kind of evidence that Carroll relies on, one has reason to go even further. If all the evidence Carroll has for his theory involves the expressions of fear and disgust that fictional characters manifest in horror fictions, then the most that Carroll is warranted in claiming is (2), i.e. that art-horror is just (a name for) the co-occurrence of fear and disgust. Any claim such as (1) or (3), i.e. one that postulates an emotional response that is over and above both fear and disgust, is unwarranted—unless there is evidence of phenomenological, physiological, evaluative etc. patterns of response that are different from the simple co-occurrence of those of fear and disgust. But I do not find any such evidence in Carroll.

3. Impurity

Beyond these ambiguities, Carroll goes on to qualify *impurity* by tying it to the notion of *categorial violation*. In doing so, he adopts a view of *impurity* based on Mary Douglas's anthropological work on pollution and dirt.[12] On such a view, something is impure if it violates "the boundaries of the

[11] Carroll (1990), 30.

[12] In Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (Routledge, 1966/2003).

deep categories of a culture's conceptual scheme".[13] On the face of it, however, Carroll here provides only a sufficient condition for impurity. So it is still possible, on his account, that some impure things are not categorially violating. Nevertheless, he is clear that categorial violation is the key notion to understanding impurity *in the case of* horror monsters: "the monsters of the horror genre [...] are beings or creatures that specialize in [categorial violation]".[14]

However, Mary Douglas's original theory is not straightforwardly a theory of disgust. Douglas's theory explains concepts and behaviours related to *impurity*, in terms of the violation of deep categorial boundaries. According to her theory, a given culture considers some things as impure because they threaten the validity of that culture's categorization of the world. Nonetheless, as Douglas characterizes it, the class of impure things does include many common disgust elicitors (e.g. faeces). Moreover, although disgust is never explicitly mentioned in her 1966 book (which predates the more recent blossoming of research on disgust), she does mention disgust in the 2003 preface to the Routledge Classics edition of her book.[15] Indeed, Douglas's theory is now often understood as a theory of disgust.[16]

On the Douglas-inspired theory that Carroll endorses, disgusting things are such in virtue of their ambiguous ontological status. For faeces, for instance, the ambiguity would be "in terms of

[13] Carroll (1990), 32.

[14] Carroll (1990), 32.

[15] Douglas (1966/2003), xvii, emphasis mine: "[B]iologists have thought that dirt, in the form of bodily excretions, produces a universal feeling of disgust. They should remember that there is no such thing as dirt; no single item is dirty apart from a particular system of classification".

[16] See e.g. Edward Royzman and John Sabini, "Something it takes to be an emotion: The interesting case of disgust", *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviou*r 31 (2001), 29–58, 40–41.

[16] Carroll (1990), 32.

categorical oppositions such as me/not me, inside/outside, and living/dead".[17] However, this Douglas-inspired theory is out of touch with the contemporary understanding of disgust that has developed over the last three decades of theoretical and empirical research. Ample evidence suggests that disgust was evolutionarily selected as a defence mechanism against the biological threat posed to human life by poisons and parasites.[18] An account in terms of categorial violation has difficulty explaining this evidence, as it is unlikely that human cultural categories developed in such a way as to leave pathogenic substances systematically in violation of, or at the interstices between, those categories (for one thing, deep cultural categories deal with much more than just illness and oral incorporation).

A Douglas-inspired theory of disgust also suffers from the fatal flaw of being unable to predict very common members of the class of disgusting things. For instance, it does not rule out of this class categorially interstitial things such as robots: regardless of whether they are animate or inanimate creatures, robots rarely gross us out. Although certain very realistic robotic devices may be said to be uncanny, they are not typically disgusting. Among other prominent categorially violating kinds of things that do not commonly disgust are oddities in the fauna (e.g. penguins: birds or mammals?), flora (e.g. dwarf trees), holes (are they objects or not?) and

[17] Carroll (1990), 32.

[18] See e.g. Valerie Curtis and A. Biran, "Dirt, disgust, and disease", *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 44 (2001), 17–21, and Daniel Kelly, *Yuck!* (MIT Press, 2011). A slightly more dated, but still quite influential, view in experimental psychology is that disgust is at its core a defence from oral incorporation (Paul Rozin and April Fallon, "A perspective on disgust", *Psychological Review* 94 (1987), 23–41). This view is not incompatible with the evolutionary, pathogen-avoidance view (see Rozin, "On the origin of disgust", *Emotion Researcher*, <http://emotionresearcher.com/on-the-origin-of-disgust/>). Moreover, it, too, is at odds with a Douglas-inspired theory of disgust: see Rozin and Fallon (1987), 29.

many others.[19] At the same time, a Douglas-inspired theory of disgust *excludes* from the class of disgusting things many otherwise obvious members. All sorts of animals (insects, spiders, pigs etc.) are disgusting for many people and in many cultures. However, many such animals would seem to fall straightforwardly into perfectly legitimate categories.[20]

One can certainly make efforts to save this Douglas-inspired theory of disgust from each of these counterexamples. For instance, one could say that insects are disgusting in many cultures because interstitial between the category of mammals and that of birds. But, then, one would have to explain why, for example, people in New Guinea eat fried grasshoppers.[21] In some cases, such an endeavour might even have good chances of success. One can for instance suggest that, in a particular culture, certain categories are or are not sufficiently central or "deep". But, ultimately, attempts of this kind are likely difficult to accomplish successfully given the *number* of counterexamples that can be brought against the theory.

An even bigger problem with *categorial violation* is that it is a vague and very porous notion—especially when it is applied to entire human cultures. For one thing, vagueness is a concern. What exactly are the deep categories of a culture's conceptual scheme? Which cultural categories are deep, and which are shallow? It looks as though a great deal of discretion is going to be needed in order to work with Carroll's notion of *impurity*. This does in turn raise concerns about the notion's theoretical usefulness. Moreover, there are bound to be lots of different categorial systems in any one culture, many of which are implicit, ill-defined or inconsistent. Also, the boundaries of many

[19] See Royzman and Sabini (2001), 40–1.

[20] Cf. Rozin and Fallon, "A perspective on disgust".

[21] Cf. also Rachel Herz, *That's Disgusting: Unraveling the mysteries of repulsion* (W.W. Norton, 2012).

of these categories are likely to be vague. All of this means that a theory of disgust based on categorial violation is significantly slippery in escaping falsification, at the expense of theoretical usefulness and power of prediction.

4. Conclusion

I have raised concerns about Carroll's account of the affective response that is distinctive of horror fictions. Part of the account's implausibility, I have argued, is due to the role that impurity plays in it. By adopting a more plausible account of disgust, however, it would still be possible to endorse a view of horror as the juxtaposition of fear and disgust. Such a view, however, would need to be decoupled from either one of Carroll's other central claims: viz. (a) that monsters are essential to horror fictions, and (b) that monsters are essentially categorially violating. A case in point are robots or autonomous machines, such as those one sees as monsters/protagonists in *Christine* (1983) or *Duel* (1971). As I have argued, while these may be categorially violating, they are not for this reason disgusting. As a consequence, such monsters cannot as such be the source of the disgust that is appropriate to horror fictions. Nonetheless, monsters may be sources of disgust in other ways, perhaps in virtue of the blood and gore that their actions cause. So, if one is happy to decouple it from Carroll's claims about horror monsters, one can still have a coherent view of horror as the juxtaposition of fear and disgust. However, this will mean sacrificing the unity of Carroll's account of horror as an artistic genre that essentially involves both monsters and the juxtaposition of fear and disgust. Once this unity is dissolved, then it is worth probing further the question of whether it is indeed the case that there is an affective response, distinctive of horror, that is constituted by the juxtaposition of fear and disgust.