

Horror and the Idea of Everyday Life: On Skeptical Threats in *Psycho* and *The Birds*

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Sometimes art provokes outrage, fear and disgust. In the case of horror, that is the point. Those who enjoy horror might seek no justification or defense for it. But because of the strong feelings elicited by horror and the outrageous acts that are depicted in it, to those sensitive to offense it is hard not to feel that some justification or defense is needed. There are some obvious strategies for this, for example, raising the flag of “art for art’s sake” (or “entertainment for entertainment’s sake”); or by contrast, explicating the *value* of horror (for example, its moral or educational value — see Nietzsche 1968 [orig. 1889], 92–3). There are also strategies appealing to other categories of value, along the lines of Nietzsche’s explanation of the value of tragedy as a dionysian rallying cry. In this essay, I intend to explain the value of horror in terms that are neither aesthetic nor moral. My goal is to show that horror has an *epistemological* value.¹

I. The Concept of Horror

In what follows I will mostly use the term “horror” to refer to a literary and film genre (or more broadly, a motif) instantiated in artistic works. I will also occasionally refer to horror as a particular emotion or a kind of psychological experience. The defense I propose of horror in the first, primary sense (as a genre or motif) requires us to take up

two philosophical questions: “What is horror?” and, “What is good about it?” My main interest here is not in defining what horror is, but rather in exploring the defense of horror — the prospects of an “apology” in the classical sense. But we cannot say in general what is good about horror unless we understand what it is. Thus I propose the following working definition. Horror has two central elements: (1) an appearance of the evil supernatural or the monstrous (where this includes the psychopath who kills monstrously), and (2) the intentional elicitation of dread, visceral disgust, fear, or startle emotions in the spectator or reader.² On this understanding, some of the most popular and critically acclaimed works of art and entertainment have contained elements of horror. It is instantiated not only in contemporary film, but in the whole history of literary and representational art (Dante’s *Inferno*, Shakespeare’s tragedies, paintings by Caravaggio and Goya, to mention some obvious examples).

This definition builds upon others offered in the philosophical literature on horror. Noel Carroll defines horror as a genre representing contra-natural, threatening monsters (1990, pp. 15–16; 27–29). According to Carroll, the genre plays upon a viewer’s characteristic emotional aversion to the idea of such monsters as they are represented in his or her thoughts. For Carroll, monsters are essentially fictional, not something to be worried about in real life. The viewer knows that they do not exist. My definition is broader than Carroll’s in that it allows for horror with no specific monster and also allows for “realistic” monsters. I have attempted in this way to respond to the criticism that Carroll’s definition is too narrow, excluding works like *Psycho* and *The Shining*.³ On my view, unlike Carroll’s, the threats that horror presents are not always fictional but can bleed into the actual world.

II. The Value of Horror

The question of horror's value has been clouded in a couple of ways. First of all, some horror films emphasize graphic depictions of sadistic violence to the exclusion of almost everything else, in something like the way pornographic films focus on graphic depictions of sex to the exclusion of almost everything else. This has led many people to question the value of the horror genre as a whole. For example, Gianluca Di Muzio (2006) takes *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* as a model. (In fact there is much more to this film than graphic violence, but let us set our quibbles aside.) In this film, a small group of youths wander into the clutches of a clan of psychopaths who torture, murder and eat them. The film depicts their sadistic torture and murder. One character narrowly escapes. Di Muzio argues that to enjoy such a film is like enjoying a film depicting the torture of children. He claims that it could only have a corrupting influence on one's moral character since it involves "silencing one's compassionate attitudes" in the face of (depictions of) terrific and pointless violence (287). Di Muzio claims that the spectator to such a show risks "atrophying her capacity for appropriate compassionate reactions and her ability to appraise correctly situations that make moral demands on her" (285).

There is no doubt that the violence of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* is shocking and perverse. But the basic claim of Di Muzio's argument nonetheless does not hold even as applied to "slasher" horror. For it seems plausible to say that the experience of horror essentially involves the *engagement* of one's compassionate attitudes. That is what makes horror horrible. Suppose I cringe with dread while watching Pam (one of the characters in the film) being hung on a meat hook. Suppose I can hardly watch and I feel

nauseated. Later I cannot get the image out of my head, particularly at night and during my visits to the butcher counter at the supermarket. Although these reactions may be unpleasant and it may be puzzling to some people why I should ever wish to experience them, they are not desensitized reactions. On the contrary, the reaction of terror appears on its face to be a morally *engaged* reaction. And although a sensitive viewer may be morally overwhelmed by the violence depicted in horror film, there is no obvious causal link between being overwhelmed in this way and the atrophy of moral sensitivity. If there is such a link, it requires proof not offered by Di Muzio.

In any case, we are concerned with the value of horror as a contribution to art and entertainment in general, not only with the most graphic instances of the horror genre. Di Muzio does not discuss whether, in principle, horror can contribute something to great art and entertainment. Elements of horror such as dread and the sense of the uncanny add something to the artistry and interest of *Macbeth*, for example. It is doubtful that Di Muzio would deny this. Thus the focus on the graphic character of violence in slasher films diverts attention from basic issues about horror's value.

There is also a second way that the question of the value of horror has been improperly handled. Critical discussion has focused more on why horror is pleasurable rather than on why it is aesthetically or morally valuable. The appeal of horror as a theme or a genre, it has been said, is paradoxical. Why should it be enjoyable or attractive to witness horrific events as they are depicted in films, fiction and art? When Marion Crane is stabbed in the shower scene in *Psycho*, and when Norman Bates then disposes of her dead body, why do we enjoy watching it?⁴
(It is beautifully filmed, but then why don't the other aspects of the scene override or

outweigh its cinematic beauty?) These are indeed fascinating questions, and have been answered in various ways by theorists of film. The gamut of explanations runs from a theory of repressed drives which pleasurably return to the viewer in his or her identification with the monster and/or the victim of horror, to a more scientifically austere explanation in terms of the neurophysiology of startle reactions and the social phenomenon of collective film-viewing experiences.⁵

The problem is that these are psychological answers to a psychological question, not philosophical answers to a philosophical question. Although philosophy certainly has something to contribute to the resolution of psychological questions (for example, by clarifying psychological concepts and the nature of psychological evidence), it cannot resolve these questions completely on its own. “Why is horror pleasurable?” is at least partly an empirical or scientific question about people, requiring that we understand regular and general principles of human psychology and anthropology. This is why I take the Paradox of Horror in a different way. If there is any philosophical puzzle here, it concerns what is *good* about horror, not just what is pleasurable about it.

In this essay, I will try to put the philosophical discussion of horror back on track. I will argue that there is something good about horror — I mean, aesthetically interesting and epistemologically good. I shall argue that by the threats it presents to the everyday life of the viewer, horror gives us a perspective on so-called “common-sense”. It helps us to see that a notion of everyday life completely secure against threats cannot be ruled out, and that the security of common-sense is a persistent illusion. In order to make this clear, I will compare horror and philosophical skepticism, arguing that the threats they pose are structurally similar.⁶ As with our purported philosophical solutions to skepticism, the

idea of security in the everyday is based on an intellectually dubious but pragmatically attractive construction. We can hardly resist relying on the world not to annihilate us, and we can hardly resist trusting others not to do so. This is not because such reliance is rationally compulsory, but because we choose it as the most easy and natural strategy. One of the best things about horror is that it allows us viscerally to experience this as an epistemological choice.

III. Horror and Philosophical Skepticism

Philosophical skepticism deploys the following sorts of statements as premises in arguments intended to undermine our ordinary claim to knowledge or justified belief:

Consistent with what I can verify in my experience, it could be the case that everything that appears to me is the creation of an evil demon and that the world as I know it does not exist.⁷

This statement is distinctive for its sweeping implications for the epistemic rationality of belief. This sweeping generality is characteristic of philosophical skepticism as contrasted with more mundane or local forms of skepticism. Philosophical skepticism holds that no human can have any knowledge or justification in a given area, for example on questions of religion, the future, morality, or the external world. Much of the interest of this kind of skepticism lies in its implications for the rationality of belief. Global skepticism is a powerful philosophical weapon against ordinary belief. For ordinary believers it has the striking consequence that they should abandon their belief that the world is at all the way it appears. Philosophers often try to refute skeptical arguments, and surely this is one of the reasons why — because it threatens ordinary belief.

General skeptical premises similar to the one above are occasionally dramatized, as in the film *The Matrix*. But it is more common in works of art to dramatize local

skeptical premises, such as the premise:

Consistent with what I can verify in my experience, it could be the case that I will wake up tomorrow as a giant insect. (Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*)

Horror often dramatizes the ordinary or everyday world gone berserk and the transmogrification of the commonplace. The horror film makes the case that such a transmogrification, so far as any one of us can tell, might happen at any moment, and this casts our reliance on the everyday world around us into a shadow. The persuasiveness of the case that a given horror film makes depends on how vivid or real the horror film can make the premise seem, and on our background susceptibility to doubt or anxiety about the thing that the premise concerns. For example, although from day to day we are not worried about the possibility of flesh-eating zombies, perhaps the premise

Consistent with what I can verify in my experience, anybody I know (including myself) could turn into a rabid, contagious zombie (*28 Days Later*)

gains some of its psychological force from the real-life plausibility of an outbreak of deadly influenza or plague. There is a distinctive way that horror fiction and film can bring this threat home to the reader or viewer. A documentary about the flu pandemic of 1918, or about avian flu, could raise fears about a deadly outbreak, but unlike horror it would not depict very specific evils associated with such a flu (the sudden violation of one's body, the fear of death) as happening *now*. Hence it would not elicit fear in the same way that horror does when it represents events — even historical events — as happening in the present tense of the viewer with an open outcome.

The fact is, though, that even if horror does draw on everyday anxieties for its effectiveness, the connection with them does not have to be particularly close. It does not seem to be generally true that horror must bear a relation of symbolism or similarity to

any real-life threat in order to create its characteristic emotional response. Horror can present its threats in a “realistic” and genuinely terrifying way even when its audience does not act as if these threats were real after they have left the theater. There seems to be a deep reservoir of anxieties capable of fueling horror: about dying and those who have died, about technology gone amok, about the deterioration of the body, and the collapse and unknowability of the human mind. These are not just everyday worries. They are the worries of the horror realm, even when they are occasioned by real life.

This contrast between the horror-realm and the realm of the everyday is much like the contrast between skepticism and “common-sense” (ordinary life, everyday life). Consider David Hume’s famous account of skeptical philosophical arguments and their relation to everyday life. After presenting his own highly distinctive account of the “manifold contradictions and imperfections in human reason” he claims that the authority and legitimacy of reason have been thoroughly undermined (Hume 1969, 316). He “can look upon no opinion even as more probable or likely than another” (*ibid.*). The skeptical arguments he has put forward show that he is “in the most deplorable condition imaginable, environed with the deepest darkness, and utterly deprived of the use of every member and faculty” (*ibid.*). Reason itself cannot save him from this condition, for it is an examination of reason that originally led him into this state. But there is a silver lining: “since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, Nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium. ... I dine, I play a game of backgammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when, after three or four hours’ amusement, I would return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strained, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any further”

(*ibid.*). The return to everyday life restores our equilibrium.

Something like this same return to everyday life and common-sense is experienced as one walks out of the theater after a horror film into a theater parking lot on a sunny afternoon. As moments pass the worry that a monster or psychopath is about to drain one's blood into a tub is shaken off like the fears from a dream. Everyday fears and worries well up in the place of the "melancholy and delirium" induced by the horror.⁸

Horror films often induce or suggest a particular state of uncertainty, experienced as epistemic anxiety, melancholia, or paranoia. My claim here is that this can be articulated as a kind of skeptical statement and forms the basis of a problematic argument that has no easy solution. Instead of trying to provide a general recipe for such a skeptical argument, I will take as examples two films by Alfred Hitchcock that are commonly said, individually or together, to be important milestones or turning points in the history of horror: *Psycho* and *The Birds*. These films initiate a new era of the horror genre in contemporary film, and each epitomizes different strands of that genre. The films are landmark horror films in part because, unlike some of their predecessors, they offer no moral reassurance that humans can dispel or effectively fight against the threats they present. These films merit extended analysis in their own right (and have received it). Of necessity, in this essay we can only focus on a few aspects of each and cannot take up the critical literature in detail. But I hope nevertheless to see how a kind of epistemic uncertainty emerges from these films — not just as a part of the plot, but as a general and unresolved epistemic anxiety for the *viewer*, which (s)he can only resolve by turning toward everyday life once again.

Each of these films dramatizes a paranoid scenario.⁹ In *The Birds*, the paranoid

scenario is that, for all we can tell, a familiar and seemingly benign part of the background can suddenly change its basic nature and attempt to annihilate human life. In the case of *Psycho*, the scenario is that for all we know a seemingly ordinary person (possibly including the viewer him- or herself) can turn out to be a homicidal “monster” without an integrated human mind. The way in which these films make an epistemological point is by making these scenarios vivid as terrifying alternatives to the everyday world. The situation at the beginning of each film is much like the everyday world. Their protagonists have ordinary kinds of motivations — for love, sex and money. But in each case their lives are thrown into a delirious rupture with expected patterns of nature and human interaction. These developments are presented as real in the films themselves. The crucial point is that the viewer is not in a position rationally to refuse the scenario of the film as impossible, and that the paranoid scenario thus threatens to annihilate the viewer. This is the similarity with philosophical skepticism, which threatens to annihilate our knowledge (including our knowledge of other minds and our own future existence). The viewer nonetheless returns to her state of reliance on the world and on others, as she goes home after the film is over, because it is the only practical thing to do. One consequence of my account of these films and by extension of horror generally is that, as on Hume’s account of skepticism, there is no resolution of our fears except to go on.

IV. Epistemology and *The Birds*

In *The Birds*, the paranoid scenario is that:

Consistent with what I can verify in my experience, I could suddenly find that the birds of the world are now collectively trying to annihilate humans.

The genius of Hitchcock's film is partly that it makes this rather outlandish and unexpected specification of the skeptical premise seem so plausible. The plot is roughly as follows. Melanie Daniels arrives in Bodega Bay, a small coastal California town to make a surprise delivery of two pet lovebirds to the young sister of a romantic interest, Mitch Brenner. Just after she makes her delivery, the seagulls begin to attack, pecking her forehead as she makes her way back from the Brenner's house to the town in a borrowed boat. Soon after, birds kill a farmer by pecking his eyes out, and a schoolhouse is attacked by crows. After these attacks, Melanie goes to a local diner to make some telephone calls. It is at the diner where the various reactions to this surprising and awful news are dramatized in a fourteen minute "play within a play" including "a full-scale philosophical symposium" on the question of the birds (Paglia 1998, pp. 69, 71). One might expect such a symposium to put a drag on the film, but the practical urgency of the questions raised gives it dramatic life. Moreover, in the middle of this episode the full avian attack on the town begins. Melanie retreats with Mitch's family to their house across the bay, they board up the windows and doors, and endure a harrowing battle with the birds. In the final scene of the film the birds are waiting outside by the millions as the humans try to creep away towards safety.

As Paglia suggests, the intellectual center of the film is the symposium at the diner concerning what to believe about the birds. In this episode Melanie has just experienced the birds' aggression first hand and come to believe the paranoid scenario of the film, that the birds are trying to annihilate humankind. Some of the customers believe her. The dull-witted bartender, charmed by Melanie, gives her immediate and credulous support; the drunkard at the bar, citing scripture, hollers that it is the end of the world.

But others at the diner react with caution or outright skepticism. The local cannery owner in the corner, Mr. Shoals, also has first-hand experience of the birds' aggression, but he doesn't believe they intend to start a war with humankind. There is also an amateur ornithologist present, the elderly Mrs. Bundy. After hearing Melanie's story she states her scientific opinion that "birds are not aggressive creatures," that different species do not flock together ("the very concept is unimaginable"), and that their "brain-pans" are too small to coordinate an attack on the town. Mrs. Bundy has spent time observing and even doing a yearly count of the birds in the area, exhibiting confident expertise in her judgment that a coordinated bird attack of the kind Melanie has witnessed is impossible. Her wisdom is our wisdom. It is exactly the sort of rationale one would articulate, and rightly so, to refute a lurid tabloid story about UFO's or vampires. Here it is intended to refute the paranoid scenario.

The debate over what to believe goes on for some time, and escalates into an exchange between Mitch who thinks they're in "real trouble" and would be "crazy to ignore it," the dismissive Mrs. Bundy, and Mr. Shoals, who wants to stick to the appearances and not draw any sweeping conclusions ("all I'm saying is that they attacked my boats"). Just a moment before, a very worried mother dining with her two young children chided the others, "You're all sitting around debating. What do you want them to do next, crash into that window?" Now her worries become real and the horrific interruption occurs. The birds themselves impinge on the philosophical debate. Melanie, looking out the window, watches as a bird strategically knocks over a gas station attendant, causing a gasoline explosion, and shrieking birds terrorize everybody outside.

The scene at the diner particularly emphasizes the epistemological issues at stake.

The characters have their initial doubts about what is happening, at least before they witness the full-scale bird attack. But the film ventures to show that even reassuring common-sense or scientific claims based on careful observation do not preclude the possibility of a sudden rupture with our everyday expectations. The paranoid scenario is presented to the viewer — to *us*, outside the picture frame — and concerns whether what is depicted in the film is possible for us. To the extent that we are drawn in to the film, or find it realistic, we accept this scenario as at least a logical possibility and we experience it as plausible. One of the common reactions after seeing this particular film is to see birds in an ominous light. Paul Wells writes about one person's recollection: "It was the day after the *Birds* had been shown on television and I was walking through Holland Park in central London. I saw a group of children, who had just visited the Commonwealth Institute, dive to the floor as a flock of pigeons rose into the air" (Wells 2000, 77). If we, like the children from the park, actually become fearful even for a moment that such a scenario is possible, we may find ourselves returning to the considerations raised by Mrs. Bundy: "Scientific explanations of animal behavior do not allow for interspecies cooperation; Birds have no motive to attack humans; Why would the birds wait until now to launch an attack on humans (and why here)?" These are all cogent considerations, and in ordinary life we take them to be conclusive reasons eliminating the possibility that birds will collectively attack. But what I wish to say along with Hume is that we are not compelled to do so by epistemic rationality. For the characters in the film raise exactly these reassuring considerations, and only a moment later are fearing for their lives. Mrs. Bundy doesn't say another word; she is cowering in the hallway with the others.

Thus, when we turn off the film or walk out of the theater, it is not as if we switch off our fear, or even reason our way back to an ordinary trust of birds (and whatever other forces in our everyday surroundings might suddenly and hideously turn against us — other films in this lineage such as *Cujo*, *Christine* and *Child's Play* exhibit variations). The fears are still there. They simply fade into the background as we go about our business, returning to conversation and backgammon, as Hume said.

Under the right circumstances most people can occasionally find themselves in a place where the paranoid scenario of horror is suddenly a live possibility. In 1992, while working part-time at the auditorium at the University of Colorado, I heard a story about a janitor who worked there long before me. In July 1966 he raped and murdered a woman in one of the towers of the neo-gothic auditorium (Doligosa 2006). Campus folklore holds that her ghost haunts the building. One week, I found out that I had to work alone in the building at night on the very anniversary of this horrific event. That evening I brought the vacuum cleaner up to the second floor and was just outside the spiral staircase to the tower. A chill crept over me and I was ready to experience something bizarre — perhaps the ghost of the murdered woman would take her revenge on another employee. Then I went on with my job and walked back to my apartment. The fears were in my mind all along — I did not need to be in the grip of a fiction to experience them. But then I was back to everyday life.

V. *Psycho*

Despite some thematic similarities to *The Birds*, *Psycho* raises a rather different set of worries for the viewer.¹⁰ In brief, Marion Crane, the would-be protagonist of

Psycho, steals \$40,000 from her employer and absconds from Phoenix to California. Having left her job, she is palpably alone and cannot return to Phoenix (the city name is symbolic). She and her lover are separated; the journey away from her previous life is drawn-out and lonely. Thus it is with a sense of relief that we find Marion striking up a conversation with the young clerk at the Bates Motel, Norman Bates. Shortly after they talk in the motel office, she goes back to her room to take a shower, and she is murdered, apparently by Norman's deranged mother. Then Norman cleans up, wrapping her dead body in a plastic shower curtain and sending it into a muddy pool in the trunk of her car. During the remainder of the film we gradually learn that Norman is the murderer. He keeps his mother's dead body in the house and dresses himself up with her clothes and a wig to enact his split personality. By the end of the film, after another killing, Norman is caught by the police. In the last scene we see him wrapped in a blanket, and hear the inner voice of his mother asserting her innocence. A vision of his mother's skull is superimposed on Norman's face. Whereas in *The Birds* the threatening scenario is purely external, here it is psychological, arising from Norman's mental disintegration.

Psycho's psychological, internal orientation raises some questions of genre. According to Noel Carroll's account of horror, it is not a horror movie because it doesn't have a monster in the true sense: psychopaths are human beings, not monsters (except metaphorically). Vampires, zombies, even berzerk birds can count as monsters. The weird guy running the motel off the highway cannot, at least not according to Carroll, because monsters exist only in fiction, whereas he exists (or might have existed) in reality. For Carroll, the fictionality of monsters is central to the account of what makes horror pleasurable: "the pleasure and interest that many horror fictions sustain ... derive

from the disclosure of unknown and impossible beings ...” (1990, 184). He continues, “... their [monsters’] very impossibility vis a vis our conceptual categories is what makes them function so compellingly in dramas of discovery and confirmation ...” (*ibid.*, 185).

Thus we should distinguish between two problems that Carroll’s account raises, a conceptual problem and a problem in explaining what is good about horror. The conceptual question is whether *Psycho* counts as horror at all. To most people the answer to this question seems straightforwardly that it does count. Conceptually, public sentiment and critical opinion do not square with Carroll’s definition of horror. If Carroll were right about what horror is, not just *Psycho*, but even *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, based on the same “true story” as *Psycho* (serial killer Ed Gein), would not be horror.¹¹ This cannot be right. But setting this conceptual issue aside, Carroll’s analysis also presents a challenge to my account of why horror is good. “Internal” horror films such as *Psycho* traffic in abnormal psychology, not paranormal or supernatural phenomena. Hence they cannot offer the same epistemological fodder that a supernatural being could. For Carroll, the pleasure of horror is epistemological: it comes from “dramas of discovery and confirmation” that are uniquely exemplified in terms of supernatural creatures (*op cit.*). Although my account of what is good about horror is different from Carroll’s account of what is pleasurable about it, there is nonetheless an objection to my account of a film like *Psycho* that one might lodge on Carroll’s behalf. One might argue that since psychopaths really exist, horror films such as *Psycho* and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* do not present a skeptical alternative to belief in everyday reality. Instead, they dramatize a scenario of which we are already aware *within* everyday reality. Hence they do not run in parallel with skeptical arguments.

My response to this challenge is to deny that the subject matter of *Psycho* and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* is a part of everyday reality. This is not to say that these films do not present their subject matter as real, nor is it to deny that serial killers exist in the real world. It is just to say that the everyday reality of the viewer — that is, the viewer's idea of what is normal, expected, and commonsensical — is typically insulated from and threatened by the sorts of scenarios that are presented in the film. Thus the critical discussion of *Psycho* admits a striking contrast between the world into which Marion Crane stumbles and that of everyday reality. As Paul Wells writes, "...Psycho locates shockingly transgressive events in an everyday context, subject to ordinary conditions" (*op. cit.*, p. 75).¹² Robin Wood writes of the opening sequence in which the camera zeroes in on a single window in a cityscape, which happens to be the hotel room of Marion and her lover, "this could be any place, any date, any time, any room: it could be us *Psycho* begins with the normal and draws us steadily deeper and deeper into the abnormal" (Wood 2004, p. 75). Whereas Carroll interprets the name Norman as "*Nor-man*: neither man nor woman but both" (Carroll 1990, p. 39), I am more inclined to think of his name's ironic suggestion of normalcy: a normal man, an everyman. Norman represents an everyday person, whom we find, in the journey of the film, to have an abnormally dark side. The paranoid scenario of the film is about the dark side of seeming every-men.

As in *The Birds*, the first intellectual flash-point of the film is a conversation that comes just before the full onslaught of horror. Norman had originally proposed that Marion have dinner in the house on the hill, but his mother loudly objected as Marion listened from her hotel room below. She ends up dining in the motel office and

conversing with Norman. Norman seeks affable collusion in his resentment toward his mother. Then Marion casually suggests that Norman might try putting her in an institution, and suddenly Norman goes cold. The threat to his mother — who, as we learn later, exists only as a part of Norman — cracks the brittle edges of his goofy, boyish sociability. (One of the unanswered questions of the film is whether Marion Crane's threatening stance toward Mrs. Bates in this scene is what leads to her murder, or whether she was already poised to become a victim beforehand.) Unlike the diner scene from *The Birds*, the conversation between Norman and Marion does not concern the paranoid scenario of the film, because the horror has not yet even started at that point in *Psycho*. But the scene is nonetheless pivotal in the epistemological drama, which in this case revolves around Marion's vulnerability and dependence. Marion is in a condition of total social isolation from all stable institutions (the law, her employer, married life). Her question is therefore about whom she can trust. She leaves her familiar environment and her place in it, and she is immediately placed in a condition of flailing anxiety and vulnerability. For example, she is subject to unscrupulous dealings as she sells the car linked with her crime, and she finds herself alone on the highway except for a mysterious cop on a motorcycle who trails her for hours and then parts ways. Arriving in the dark and rain at a vacant motel, she is at the end of her rope, choosing to rely on a complete stranger. In the office scene, at first we have the reassuring sense that there is nothing wrong with this choice. After all, Norman is sensitive enough to offer her dinner, and polite enough to keep her company. She is not so vulnerable as to lose her composure and affability during their conversation even when it becomes uncomfortable.

But then her vulnerability is exploited. Norman first violates her privacy by

peeping at her through a hole in the wall, and then he (as Mother) kills her in the shower. The particulars of Norman's psychopathy, particularly as expounded in the psychoanalytic cant of the film, are of no importance to the film's terror. What is fundamental is Marion's vulnerability and aloneness (symbolized by her nakedness in the shower), and the shocking consequences of her mistaken reliance on Norman. This is why, for some viewers, it was "the first horror movie which they could not forget, and felt frightened about it even within the apparent safety of their own homes" (Wells 2000, p. 31). Thus the paranoid scenario of *Psycho* is that

Consistent with what I can verify in my experience, it could be the case that the seemingly ordinary person I now rely upon in a moment of human vulnerability will annihilate me.

There are many details that make a crucial contribution to the horror of the shower scene: the gigantic knife, the translucent plastic curtain, the revolting sound the knife makes as it plunges into Marion's body, and so on. But Marion's aloneness and vulnerability are fundamental. Moreover, the ordinariness of the beginning of the film, and the viewer's knowledge that the film is based on a true story, amplify the personal interest we have in the paranoid scenario. It is the shocking transition from everyday life to a murder in one's most vulnerable moment that gives the scenario its edge, Carroll's objections notwithstanding.

IV. Everyday Life and Its Alternatives

Everyday life is saturated with our apparently justified reliance on others and on the world around us — saturated with trust. As Annette Baier writes, trust is like the air

we breathe, in that we only notice it when it disappears or goes bad (Baier 1986). It is by understanding trust better that we can understand how horror relates to everyday life. So far I have left the notion of “everyday life” mostly unanalyzed and intuitive. Now we are in a position to say more, by relating it to trusting reliance. The “everyday” encompasses those tacit assumptions of reliability that allow us to negotiate the world from one moment to the next: this bird will not attack me (if I thought it would, I would not be able to walk down the street without terror); this person will not murder me (if I thought he would, I would not be able to stay the night at a hotel without terror).

In order to refine this point, suppose we distinguish between practical and cognitive trust. Practical trust is based on well-founded confidence in our ability to act and carry out our intentions, whereas cognitive trust is well-founded confidence in our beliefs. Although they are conceptually different, these two kinds of trust are usually woven together. Suppose I want to cross a dark parking lot safely. On the one hand there is an action to be performed, crossing the parking lot. On the other hand there are a number of related beliefs I might have: there are no persons — or birds, or zombies — about to attack me, the surface of the parking lot will not rupture as I cross it, I am not in a nightmare induced by a demon, etc. In most ordinary actions I have these backing beliefs implicitly and they make me feel confident or justified that my action will succeed. The beliefs are generally implicit or latent rather than conscious or occurrent. It is common in philosophy to point out that I have many latent beliefs, such as the belief that my gas pedal is connected to the engine of my car, that I do not entertain consciously, even though they provide backing for my actions. The beliefs that express and justify our intellectual willingness to rely upon the world and on other people are

generally like this. They are latent or implicit.

There are, however, some non-ordinary cases of action where I perform an action even though I do not have the usual backing beliefs (latent or otherwise). I can walk across the parking lot even if I *don't* believe I won't be attacked by birds, just as Mitch walks out to his car at the end of *The Birds* as countless birds watch him ominously. I can act without having the usual backing beliefs, by acting *as if* the relevant background propositions were true, and simply stepping forward. If I am lucky this *as-if* movement alone will carry me across the parking lot. But if so, I will be depending on luck, not on anything certain. It will be with no confidence that I will succeed in my action; it will be without the usual intellectual backing for practical trust.

With this discussion in hand I am now in a position to re-state the thesis about horror and epistemology. As I have portrayed it, horror's bite is explained as a sudden tearing-away of the intellectual trust that stands behind our actions. Specifically, it is a *malicious* ripping-away of this intellectual trust, exposing our vulnerabilities in relying on the world and on other people. *Psycho* and *The Birds* exhibit this ripping-away for two different domains characteristic of the horror genre, the one for human reliance and the other for reliance on the natural world. Not all skepticism is based on malicious threats — some arguments for skepticism are based on reflections about human limitations or the possibility of sheer bad luck in the formation of beliefs. But there is a long tradition in epistemology of worrying about malicious threats to the possibility of justified belief. Descartes hypothesized that in the absence of a proof of the existence of God, there might for all we know be an evil demon manipulating our thoughts and our environment in such a way as to make our beliefs about the world radically mistaken (Descartes 1986 [1642]).

More recent variants of this idea include the thought that we might be the puppets of a computer simulation (Bostrom 2003) or a mad scientist (Putnam 1982). Similarly, horror puts forward scenarios that through their vivid depiction, threaten our background cognitive reliance on others and the world around us (and we should add, thinking perhaps of the films of David Cronenbourg, our reliance on our own bodies and minds).

But what, it might be asked, could be good about that? There are three main things. First, it is a matter of not being deceived about the foundations of our practical trust. Horror helps us to experience the fact that the intellectual backing for our practical trust, consisting in the various background beliefs we have that our environment (natural and social) will behave in regular ways, cannot be made perfectly certain. Our reliance cannot be given a perfect philosophical “vindication”; all that can be done is to go on relying in the usual way. Once we give up the aim of providing a failsafe intellectual backing for our actions, we gain intellectual clarity about our actual situation of dependence and trust on birds, people, cars, and ourselves. Our reliance on these things is inherently insecure, much more like Mitch’s walk to the car than we are at first inclined to think.

Just as importantly, horror makes us realize that we can still go on, even in the absence of perfect certainty. In the climactic final assault on the house in *The Birds*, Melanie goes up the stairs to the second floor despite (or because of?) the fact that the birds are making a great stir up there. As noted in Urbano 2004, for many people Melanie’s behavior is frustrating: “Melanie ... should be more than able to assume that the noises she hears are made by birds that have managed to invade the rooms upstairs. What does she think her searchlight is going to throw light on up there? Is she stupid or

what?” (23) Urbano himself rejects this question: “unless one is willing to accept that Melanie’s reason for going upstairs is irrational, one will never be able to fully enjoy *The Birds*” — or the horror genre more generally (*ibid.*). Urbano may be right to say this, but one thing the scene does illustrate is that Melanie can act from her motive, whatever it may be (curiosity? investigation?) even when she herself knows that the backing for her actions is extremely insecure. Just as Sam and Lila do when they go to the Bates Motel at the end of *Psycho* to find out what happened to Marion, Melanie continues to walk up the stairs even though her trust cannot be secured. It demonstrates that similarly, we continue to act in the presence of fear.

Horror also brings a third epistemological insight, which is that the construction of the everyday is necessary. This insight arises from the first two. The first insight is that the intellectual backing for our practical trust is not perfectly secure. The second is that even if the backing for our practical trust is not secure, we can continue to act as if it were. The third epistemological insight is that we cannot remain content with this situation. It is necessary that we construct an idea of the everyday in which the intellectual backing for our practical trust *feels* secure, even when we know it is not secure. We must fabricate for ourselves a sphere in which we will not be attacked in our kitchens or showers, in which our own bodies will not turn suddenly against us, and in which the birds on the jungle gym are benign. There are a number of psychological reasons why this construction of the everyday is necessary, but there is one particularly general psychological reason, which is simply that we cannot focus on all the possible paranoid scenarios at once. There are too many ways the world can threaten our trust for us to keep them all in mind. We must concentrate on the most salient threats to trust.

This forces us to keep some of the myriad other paranoid scenarios off the table, at least provisionally. Once they are outside of our attentional focus, they are no longer threatening, and the idea of a regular, everyday world emerges. But the idea of a secure, regular everyday world is, then, a construction. One valuable thing about horror literature and film is that it keeps this fact in view.

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Notes

- 1 Epistemology is that branch of philosophy concerning knowledge, justification and belief.
2. This definition implies that some suspense dramas like *Klute*, *Basic Instinct*, and *No Country for Old Men* involve at least a *motif* of horror. And since this motif (as I define it) is very prominent in these films, it is a puzzle for my account that they are not acknowledged as being inside the margin of the horror genre. It may be that they are styled with too much dramatic realism to count as meeting element (1) of the definition.
3. A criticism raised by Hills (2003), who cites Russell 1998, Schneider 2000, Jancovich 1992, and Freeland 2000.

4. For this way of formulating the paradox of horror, see Levine 2004, p. 46, Gaut 1994, p. 16, and Turvey 2004, pp. 70–1.
5. On this topic see the essays in Schneider 2004.
6. Here I am borrowing a theme about tragedy and skepticism from the philosopher Stanley Cavell, as developed in Cavell 2003 and earlier books.
7. “I will suppose therefore that ... some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies in order to deceive me. I shall think that the sky, the air, the earth, colours, shapes, sounds and all external things are merely the delusions of dreams which he has devised to ensnare my judgment” (Descartes 1986, 15).
8. Coincidentally, Hume’s view of tragedy has been deployed by Carroll (*op. cit.*) to explain the pleasure of horror-film.
9. This is loosely connected with what Andrew Tudor (1989) calls the “paranoid” strand of horror. According to Tudor, horror films in which there is “an ultimately successful struggle against disorder” are “secure,” whereas horror films in which human action is ineffective and the threat continues to loom are “paranoid” (p. 215). These two Hitchcock films are surely among the transitional instances as the genre moved toward the paranoid strand.
10. The thematic similarities include some very broad ideas such as Hitchcock’s preoccupation with mother-son relationships (and women’s agency, as embodied by Melanie and Marion), and also some very specific connections like the stuffed birds and bird art in the Bates Motel which prefigure the monstrous birds of the later film.
11. See the references in note 3.
12. Wells, however, does not convey much of the sense of contrast between the

beginning of the film and the end: “[The world of *Psycho*] is everyday America, represented as an utterly remote place in which any semblance of moral or ethical security has been destabilized and proved to be illusory” (Wells 2000, p. 75).