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FI526 – The Fantastic Film

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Essay no.1 **“How pertinent to an understanding of the films on the course do you find ideas derived from psychoanalysis?”**

The range of the films on the course “The Fantastic Film” - like *Blue Velvet*, *Psycho*, *Carrie*, *Halloween*, *Vampyr*, *Dead Ringers*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *The Fly*, *The Thing*... - aims to establish a framework which brings up themes that are essential to mainly Horror and Science Fiction genres, as well as some other genres. These films are not under a single genre like Horror, Science Fiction or Fantasy, but rather, they are dependable examples for such themes as ‘theories of the dream’, ‘nightmare imagery’, ‘return of the repressed’, ‘works on Fantastic’, and ‘notions of fantasy and realism’. These themes are certainly related to and derived of psychoanalysis. It is a contemporary norm to accept that the psychoanalytic approach to Horror and Science Fiction as the ultimate approach. This essay, searches for an answer to the question – to what extent these ideas in horror and science-fiction films are derived from psychoanalysis. Approaching to this question, this essay mainly handles three key themes; ‘the inverted fairy tale’ (as argued by Mikita Brottman in his book *Offensive Films*), ‘the repression, the other and the monster’ (as argued by Robin Wood in his essay *An Introduction to The American Horror Film*), and ‘abjection and maternal’ (as argued by Barbara Creed in his book *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*).

“Everybody is a book of blood” once said Clive Barker. So, I guess it wouldn’t be wrong to say each book of blood starts with the chapter of ‘the expulsion from the garden of Eden’;... ‘birth’. This is where the humankind’s search for its essence, search for its purpose and search for its origin begins. Enigmas like life, birth, dream and death have haunted humankind’s mind for ages. In order to bear with these insoluble enigmas, man has created myths, legends and religions. Starting with the expulsion from Eden, countless myths are told from generations to generations about various unspoken matters. “According to anthropology, a culture is compelled to repeat, through its mythic narrations, the symbolic tale of its origins”¹. In contemporary culture, these myths have been substituted by the horror films. Archaic conflicts are retold in the forms of monster, alien or killer stories which make us remember the haunting questions of the mankind.

The most distinctive and dramatic examples of these myths are the ones we listen just before our bed time; the fairy tales. Fairy tales deal with “psychological problems of growing up: problems that involve overcoming narcissistic disappointments, Oedipal dilemmas, sibling rivalries, becoming able to relinquish childhood dependencies, gaining a feeling of self-worth, and a sense of moral obligation”². Children listen and evaluate these tales in their beds. The very first morals that later will be the bases for their characters is shaped by these tales. Fairy tales have good and strong morals; the kind of stuff that will prepare the child for the society he’ll live in. There are basic structures that each fairy tale follows, like certain reoccurring images and themes. The images generally in common are; an inexperienced, young and innocent protagonist - usually a child or a cuddly animal,

¹ Brottman, Mikita., *Offensive Films* (Greenwood Press, London, 1997) p.107

² Bettelheim, Bruno., *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (Penguin, London, 1978)

someone the child can easily associate himself with -, a princess that needs to be saved, a jealous antagonist, minor characters that help the protagonist along his journey and temptations and seductions that must be avoided. However, even in these naïve tales there some parts which can shatter one's spine in the early ages. The witch, who wants to bake the children that she keeps in the cages, can be seriously disturbing for some developing minds. Or the idea of entering your grandmother's house, walking into her room - alone -, waiting to hear her voice and see her face but very slowly realizing that what sleeps in your grandmother's clothes, in your grandmother's bed, the only other person in that room, there, with you is not your grandmother but a hairy beast, which lurks and swallows you...

As matter of fact, being eaten is a very common element in fairy tales. Going down through the throat of a beast can be most stressful to listen to as a young kid, just before going to sleep... But yet fascinating at the same time. There is the catch. It is the very first notion of horror literature to experience.

Mikita Brottman, in her book *Offensive Films*, talks about some very disturbing pieces of cinema. Not horror masterpieces or gore flicks but pure offensive films which are constructed to disturb and challenge the audience. The films she discusses are taboo braking films like *Freaks* (1932), *Blood Feast* (1963), *Snuff* (1976) and even Neo-Mondo films which basically feature real footages of brutal accidents, murders and torture. In one chapter of her book, she analyses *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. She finds *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1973) exceptionally disturbing due to its 'inverted fairy tale' structure. There's something in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* that deeply disturbs the audience (especially the audiences in 1973). Something that goes beyond the psychoanalytic themes of the modern slasher movies. This 'inverted fairy tale' structure gives the film a power to dig deep down to audience's childhood fears where the psychoanalysis begins. The film can easily be interpreted as a fairy tale on acid. Brottman writes;

"It is not difficult to spot structural parallels with *Jack and the Beanstalk* (the ascent into a secret world, ruled by an ogre; the descent back into the real world at daybreak, given the chase by the ax-wielding giant); *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* (the golden-haired girl encountering a bestial family sitting around their table at dinner); *Beauty and the Beast* (the beautiful daughter stolen by the ugly beast and dragged off into his own world); *Blue Beard* (the dreadful room with its terrible secret); *Little Red Riding Hood* (the girl lured into the house by a monster in disguise); and perhaps most of all, *Hansel and Gretel* (children lost in the woods, stumbling upon an attractive house owned by a cannibalistic brute, who kidnaps them and attempts to use them for food)"³.

The house of death, getting lost, cannibalism, the dinner table and the giant are reoccurring themes in fairy tales. Each based on phobias or at least fears that are there in the mind of every man since childhood. These fears are in the subconscious and can be explained by psychoanalysis. The psychoanalytic subtext leads to archaic conflicts which are repressed. However, analyzing the archaic matters and cultural artifacts, one has to consider the distinction between 'basic repression' and 'surplus repression'.

Robin Wood states that:

"Basic repression is universal, necessary and inescapable. It is what makes possible our development from an uncoordinated animal capable of little beyond screaming and convulsions into a human being; it is bound up with the ability to accept the

³ Brottman, Mikita., *Offensive Films* (Greenwood Press, London, 1997) p.111

postponement of gratification, with the development of our thought and memory process, of our capacity for self control, of our recognition of and consideration for other people. Surplus repression, on the other hand, is specific to a particular culture and is the process whereby people are conditioned from earliest infancy to take on predetermined roles within that culture.”⁴

Wood points out to the predetermined social roles assigned to individuals in the surplus repressive societies (which includes nearly every known society ever existed). Moreover, he criticizes the way these societies work and claims that the surplus repressive societies limit and restrict human creativity. Where basic repression is inaccessible for the conscious mind, surplus repression can be overthrown. Wood states that bisexuality, female sexuality/creativity and sexuality of children are severely repressed but most important of them all the sexual energy itself is repressed. This is ultimately true and the emergence of psychoanalysis in the last century has helped to slightly alter the norms.

Ideas derived from psychoanalysis are not only in myths, fairy tales and horror films but they are in every aspect of life. The realization of the importance of sexual derive and repression is an antagonist for the capitalist patriarchal societies of the modern world. Nevertheless, the moral values and societal norms are strong. Still today; “The ideal, ... is as close as possible to an automation in whom both sexual and intellectual energy have been reduced to minimum”⁵

As a consequence of the analysis of ‘the repression’, the concept of ‘the other’ should be brought to light as well. Because ‘the other’ is not only what is avoided, rejected and wanted to be annihilated, but also in psychoanalytic analysis, it is internal to the culture that wants to avoid it. The fear of ‘the other’ is in fact nothing more than the fear of the unknown parts of one’s own conscious and subconscious; the fear of the inaccessible ‘repressed’. ‘The other’ can be many things; like other social classes, other cultures, other ideologies, other sexual norms and even the children. Shortly, anything that’s distant to the capitalist, patriarchal norm can be labeled as ‘the other’). The concept of ‘final frontier’ is a relevant case for better understanding the concept of ‘the other’. The Wild West used to be the final frontier for Western literature once the new continent was discovered. After the new continent was completely conquered and cleared of the native and colonizing ‘other culture’s, in the beginning of the twentieth century, the next final frontier for the western culture became Mars. Edgar Rice Burroughs’s *A Princess of Mars* is the perfect example for this transition in Western literature. Moreover, in the contemporary works of literature, Mars is not the final frontier anymore since it has been conquered too (there’s no threat of the other). So it will be appropriate to say that the ‘final frontier’ is not a place but a literary device.

Very similarly, ‘the other’ will never be annihilated. There will always be a new ‘the other’ to address. Moreover, ‘the other’ is a necessity in order to run an efficient society... just like the invented “Goldstein” of Orwell’s *1984*.

This conflict – or balance one may call – between ‘the normality’ and ‘the other’ needs to be attacked in order to break down the restrictions and free the human creativity and potential. The most distinctive form of this attack is the Horror Film. In 1968, the first serious attack to capitalist and patriarchal norm came with George Romero’s *The Night Of The Living Dead*. The lower class citizens of the underworld,

⁴ Grant, Barry Keith., *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film* (the Scarecrow Press, London, 1984) p.165

⁵ *ibid* p.167

zombies, invading the modern American way of life, were breaching into people's houses and a graphically eating them as never depicted before. The unexpected brutal attack of the little girl strongly was the emphasis that the horror described in this movie – the threat of the zombies – was above the taboos of the American society. After a decade filled with infamous events like Vietnam War, Watergate, Ed Gein and Manson Family Massacre, young filmmakers discovered the perfect medium to show their anger. Horror Film responded to the 'repression of the other' in the most clear-cut way.

Following the success and the impact of *The Night Of The Living Dead*, in 1972 (a year before the Warner Bros. realized the power of the genre and produced *The Exorcist* by using every trick on the book), Wes Craven's *Last House On the Left* stormed the audiences. The reaction was so strong that David Hess (the rapist and murderer Krug Stillo in *Last House On the Left*) recalls that people in the subway station were running away from him after the release of the film*.

Robin Wood explains the term 'the monster' as the attack on the balance between 'the normality' and 'the other'. The balance between 'the normality' (which is shaped by 'the surplus repression') and 'the other' was now torn apart by 'the monsters' such as zombies, Krug, Leatherface, Michael Myers, Jason Verhooves, Freddy Krugger and all the other cheap but passionate creatures of the trash movies. Freud's theory about the repressed ideas that can suddenly return to haunt us proved very true and even more blazing on the 80's with the rise of the video. With the video, a new age started where Jason, Freddy, Leatherface and other 'monsters' stalked their preys during daytime, in bedrooms and living rooms while audiences eat their cornflakes (just like Freddy coming from dreams to the real world in *A Nightmare in Elm Street 7*).

In his essay, Noel Carroll touches upon the traits of the monster figures. He emphasizes the double/opposite traits. For example; Michael Myers, chasing his victims very slowly, yet being inescapable (a trait later adapted by other slasher films in 90's like *I Know What You Did Last Summer* and *Urban Legends*). It is an essential quality of the nightmares. The allegorical, calm and inescapable chase of 'the monster' is easily associated with the feeling of helplessness in the nightmare. A more basic example might be an ordinary man in someone's nightmare, doing nothing but staring at him. Such a man can be extremely scary for that someone who is dreaming. The scariness of the man in the dream is not always about his appearance, but in some cases, just a feeling that can't be put into words. The feelings derive from nightmares don't always have tangible sources. When David Lynch's films are analyzed, it is obvious that the feeling of horror comes from the subconscious, making the source of the horror rather harder to address. Carroll says, "In what sense these tales were caused by nightmares or modeled by on dreams is less important than the fact that the nightmare is a culturally established framework for presenting and understanding the horror genre. And this makes the resort to psychoanalysis unavoidable."⁶

* David Hess as the actor who played the only unmasked 'monster' had become the human face of the attack on the balance between the 'repressed' and 'the other'. He was the real monster. His career was over immediately but he became a cult, iconic image of the Horror literature. (In fact, later on in 1986, Michael Rooker played a very similar role in *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* but the audiences didn't react as extreme as they did 14 years prior.)

⁶ Carroll, Noel., *Nightmare and the Horror Film: The Symbolic Biology of Fantastic Beings*

Coming back to the tangible monster figure, another sharp way of attacking the ‘normality’ of the patriarchal society is the ‘monstrous feminine’, completely parallel to ideas derived from psychoanalysis. Writer of *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Barbara Creed, affiliates the issue to sexual difference and castration. But, different than Freud, Creed disagrees with the basic and primal notion of the male monster. Rather than handling the female as a castrated victim of the nature, she speaks about the fears of the male and the subjectivity of the female.

For Creed, the main importance is on ‘the abject’ in horror films. Creed uses Julia Kristeva’s theory of ‘the abject’ as her starting point; “that which does not respect borders, positions, rules; that which disturbs identity, system, order”. By means of disturbing the system and order, ‘blood’, ‘vomit’ and ‘excrement’ have crucial notions. ‘Blood’ especially is a dubious element. It is a sign of health and order when inside the body, and it is a sign of death and chaos when outside the body. ‘Vomit’ and ‘excrement’ have the same notion;

“They signify a split between two orders: the maternal authority and the law of the father. On the one hand, these images of bodily wastes threaten a subject that is already constituted, in relation to the symbolic, as ‘whole and proper’. Consequently they fill the subject – both the protagonist in the text and the spectator in the cinema – with disgust and loathing. On the other hand they also point back to a time when a fusion between mother and nature existed; when bodily wastes, while set apart from the body, were not seen as objects of embarrassment and shame. Their presence in horror film may invoke a response of disgust from the audience situated as it is within the social symbolic but at a more archaic level the representation of bodily wastes may invoke pleasure in breaking the taboo on filth – sometimes described as a pleasure in perversity - and a pleasure in returning to the time when mother-child relationship was marked by an untrammelled pleasure in playing with the body and its wastes”⁷

The essential point here is the ‘both repelling and attracting’ notion. This is directly related to the very essence of horror. However, an important matter is that the ‘monstrous-feminine’ and ‘the female’ in general are subjects to more and stronger taboos. As it is closer to ‘the garden of Eden’ and origin of the humankind, it is more complicated and the themes have been avoided for centuries. That’s why the infamous crucifix scene in *The Exorcist* or the opening sequence of *The Carrie* are extremely shocking and yet fascinating for the audiences.

‘Vagina dentata’ is the second major issue in Creed’s argument. An urban myth during the Vietnam War concerned Vietnamese prostitutes who have implanted razor blades into their vaginas to injure American soldiers. Popularized by Freud, the term ‘vagina dentata’ is Latin for toothed vagina. The greatest fear of the males, getting their sexual organ cut off, when they should be enjoying their organ the most. The fear of the male here is again the main notion. Freud only interprets the castration as coming from father; whereas the theme of ‘vagina dentata’ certainly addresses the mother as the castrator. Creed strongly argues that, one should - look into these kinds of themes - and realize that the nature constitutes females as objects of fear and desire.

Finally, as the themes and arguments in this essay boil down to ‘relevance of the subconscious’, ‘the notion of the nightmare’, ‘coexisting identities of myth, fairy tale and horror film’, ‘the unhealthy balance of the repressed and the other’, ‘the traits

⁷ Creed, Barbara., *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (Routledge, New York, 1993)

of the monster', 'devouring and being devoured' and the 'monstrous-feminine point-of-view' it is unavoidable to see the relevance of psychoanalysis. However, this essay points out that, the horror film has broader reference than simply sexuality as Noel Carrol agrees.

One matter to conclusively highlight is, in its own structure, psychoanalysis, is the main derive for any kind of genre, art form, philosophy, feeling and instinct. So it really comes down to, how much one embraces psychoanalysis and its guidance to related issues. Other than that, as indicated earlier, the ideas derived from psychoanalysis definitely helped the Horror and Fantastic films to be better understood and interpreted.

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