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Horror Fiction

Abstract

Horror is a relatively new emotion. It is based on the subversion of a scientific account of the world. Therefore, it could not have existed prior to the establishment of such an account. Furthermore, it is unique because it can only be experienced through a fictional medium, as only a fictional medium allows the violation of the scientific, or natural, account of the world. There are several schools of thought that attempt to explain the phenomenon of fictional emotions, but 'irrationality' appears to be the most in touch with the scientific understanding of how the brain processes fictional emotions. Ultimately, horror is based on defamiliarization, or ostranenie, which is the essence of all art.

Keywords

Horror, Fictional Emotions, Defamiliarization, Ostranenie

Disciplines

Philosophy | Philosophy of Mind

Comments

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Professor Daniel DeNicola

Philosophy 331: Emotion

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Horror Fiction

I will attempt to answer three questions in this paper. First, what is horror? What are its key characteristics as an emotion type? How is it distinct from mere fear? Second, why do we experience emotions, and in particular horror, that arise from fiction, such as literature, theater, and film? It is well-documented and widely-known that fiction often provokes visceral emotional reactions in the audience, despite the audience's awareness that the fiction being presented to them is, in fact, *fiction*. There are several schools of thought that attempt to answer this question. I will try to determine which one is the best suited for the task. Third, given that horror is generally considered an unpleasant emotion, why do we volunteer, and even pay, to experience this particular emotion? Why is the genre of horror so popular? These three questions are interconnected and fully understanding any one of them will require a comprehensive examination of all three.

Horror is a very peculiar emotion. At first, one might have trouble distinguishing it from fear. One can imagine a variety of situations in which a person may exclaim: "How horrifying!" However, I will argue that in most of those situations it may suffice to say: "How scary!" Despite horror's frequent usage in commonplace parlance, it is a very well-defined and specific emotion type, and there is a clear distinction between it and fear. Fear is a basic emotion type that has

existed for as long as humans have, if not longer. The general framework of fear is as follows: “A fears B if A perceives B to be dangerous to A.” Unlike fear, horror is a relatively recent emotion type that developed in the 18th century. It is correlated in time with the general acceptance of a scientific account of the world. The 18th century saw the displacement of religious authority with scientific authority. The first scientific societies were formed, and pseudosciences, such as astrology and alchemy, lost credibility. Inspired by this wholly-new account of the world, Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein*. Published in 1818, *Frankenstein* is considered to be the very first work of science fiction and horror.

I saw—with shut eyes, but acute mental vision—I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together. I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life and stir with an uneasy, half-vital motion. Frightful must it be, for supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavor to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world. (Shelley, 11)

Frankenstein is the story of a monster created by the titular character, Victor Frankenstein. The monster is assembled from old corpses and chemicals, brought to life by a mysterious spark. The monster possesses the mind of a young child stuck in an eight foot tall body of tremendous strength and unappealing appearance. Though initially benevolent, the monster is shunned and beaten. The monster is out of place in the world. It is alive and humanlike, yet it was never born. It “shows signs of life and stir with an uneasy, half-vital motion.” It lies somewhere between the living and the dead, a newborn and a corpse. It is not merely scary, it is *horrifying*. This brings us

to the primary distinction between fear and horror. Horror is not merely dangerous, it is repulsive in a very peculiar way. It violates categories and norms. It is *interstitial*.

One structure for the composition of horrific beings is *fusion*. On the simplest physical level, this often entails the construction of creatures that transgress categorical distinctions such as inside/outside, living/dead, insect/human, flesh/machine, and so on. Mummies, vampires, ghosts, zombies and Freddie, Elm Street's premier nightmare, are fusion figures in this respect. Each, in different ways, blur the distinction between living and dead. Each in some sense, is both living *and* dead. A fusion figure is a composite that unites attributes held to be categorically distinct and/or at odds in the cultural scheme of things in unambiguously one, spatio-temporally discrete entity. (Carroll, 43)

Shelley's monster violates the categories of life and death. It is literally made of parts of corpses stitched together, yet it is animated: it moves, it breathes, it lives. Corpses are not supposed to move or breathe or walk. Seeing an animated corpse violates every norm that we expect of a corpse. It violates our understanding of the world. This violation is *nauseous* and *disgusting*. Thus the general framework for horror can best be described in the following manner: "A is horrified by B if A perceives B to violate fundamental categories of the natural world. This violation inflicts nausea and disgust in A." It is also crucial that this violation cannot be explained away by magic anymore, because we have come to expect the world to behave in accordance with the norms and patterns prescribed by science. This is why horror could not have existed in the 5th or the 15th century. It is an emotion that is unique to a particular account of the world: the scientific account.

This brings us to the second question: Why do we experience emotions that arise from fiction? We just discussed *Frankenstein*, a literary work of fiction that evokes an intense feeling of horror. However, I will set horror aside for a moment because it poses an additional complication that may be unique to this particular emotion type. Instead, let us consider anger. I will begin by providing a framework for anger: “A is angered by B if A perceives that B has committed a wrongful act. In addition, A must perceive B to be a free agent who has committed the wrongful act of his/her own free accord.” For example, if someone freely decides to assault me and forcefully steal my belongings, and then proceeds accordingly, I would feel tremendous anger directed against this assailant. This anger would compel me to seek retribution. The analysis of anger that stems from real life situation elicits few philosophical inquiries. However, those inquiries are not the subject of this paper. In order to consider how anger may arise from fiction, and how such anger may be different from the anger that arises from real life situations, we do not need to look far. In fact, we shall once more consider *Frankenstein*. Victor Frankenstein’s monster, though horrifying, is not purely evil. The initially benevolent monster commits an act of heroism. It rescues a girl from drowning. However, due to its horrifying appearance, the villagers decide to punish it with violence and rejection. My emotional response to this terrible mistreatment of the monster manifested in the form of anger directed at the villagers. I thought that the villagers had wronged the monster by punishing it, rather than rewarding it, for its act of heroism. I believe that most readers had the same emotional response. However, this poses an interesting question: Why do I feel angry at the villagers, fully knowing that the villagers do not actually exist and that they did not actually commit a wrongful act

against the monster, which also does not really exist? There are several schools of thought that attempt to answer this question.

The first one is Factualism. Factualism states that our emotions are not directed toward fiction, but rather to the actualities that the fiction in question calls to mind. In the example of *Frankenstein*, that would mean that our anger is not truly directed at the villagers but at the actual instances of unjustified violence and rejection. Our anger is supposedly directed against “those that unjustly commit violence against heroes of unpleasant appearance.”

The stumbling block for Factualism is that it seems to the emoter that it is the Duchess of Malfi or Tereza that he feels some emotion toward—that it is these characters or their suffering that is the object of his emotion. Or, in other words, it is natural to answer the question, Whom do you pity when reading Webster’s play or Kundera’s novel?, with “the Duchess” or “Tereza,” This is how it seems “from the inside.” Yet the Factualist must hold that this is an illusion, for he must insist that the true object of emotion—the real answer to that question—is something more along the lines of “those destroyed in their pursuit of goodness” or “those in love with cruel people,” or even more simply, “ourselves” or humanity.” So there is an illusion that has to be explained away. (Yanal)

As Yanal points out, there is a clear problem with the Factualist theory. If I were to ask you whom are you angry at after reading *Frankenstein*, you may very well exclaim: “The villagers!” Yet the Factualists would have me correct you: “No, you are wrong. You are actually angry at ‘those people that unjustly commit violence against heroes of unpleasant appearance...in real life.’” Even though it is possible for people to have subconscious and misdirected emotions, it appears problematic to categorically state that a person cannot truly be angry at the villagers, or

any fictional characters for that matter, without substantive evidence for such an extraordinary claim. A very interesting idea that sheds more light on Factualism is that of Counterfactualism. Robert Yanal makes an interesting Counterfactualist claim to counter Factualism: “Perhaps counterfactuals can elicit emotions. Certainly, in everyday life, we feel remorse or satisfaction over things that didn’t come to pass. Someone’s father dies, and he thinks: ‘If only dad had lived another year he and I would have taken that fishing trip we always talked about. How sad that he didn’t.’” (Yanal) I think that a Factualist might take this argument to be facetious. A Factualist may argue that the person in the previously cited Counterfactualist example is not really sad because of the ‘fictional’ fishing trip that had never taken place, but rather sad because of the actual fact of his/her father being dead. However, I think that the distinction between the Factualist and the Counterfactualist accounts of that particular example are mostly semantic. It is difficult to determine which account is correct. I suppose that the person in the given example may say: “Well, I am not sad that my father died. Everyone has to die someday. I’m just sad that we didn’t take that particular trip.” I suppose that may tip the scale in favor of the Counterfactualist but then the Factualist may respond: “Yes, but your sadness is actually directed at the fact of your fishing trip not taking place. It’s not directed at the ‘fictional’ fishing trip itself.” And now it is clear that the Factualist argument really does take us down the rabbit hole of semantics. I cannot help but to dismiss any argument that is based on semantics.

The second school of thought is that of Quasi-emotionalism. The Quasi-emotionalist theory suggests that every emotion is accompanied by a corresponding ‘quasi-emotion’ or ‘art-emotion.’ This theory suggests that whenever we think we are experiencing an emotion in response to fiction, we are actually experiencing the corresponding quasi-emotion instead.

Continuing our *Frankenstein* example, the Quasi-emotionalists would argue that rather than experiencing anger against the villagers, we are actually experiencing 'quasi-anger.' Quasi-anger is similar to anger in that it makes us feel in a way that could be mistaken for genuine anger. However, it is also distinct from anger in that it does not compel us to act. We do not attempt to seek out the villagers and try to punish them. In effect, the Quasi-emotionalist theory multiplies the problem because it doubles the number of emotions we have to account for. Secondly, for quasi-emotions to be philosophically sound, they need to be distinct from 'actual emotions.' I am not convinced that 'quasi-anger' is distinct from 'anger' merely because it does not compel us to act. While, it is true that reading *Frankenstein* will not make us set out to find the villagers and seek retribution, actual anger does not always compel us to act either. Actual anger can be directed at past events that are so remote that there is no possible way to act on them, perhaps because the agents responsible for the anger are dead. These events, however, are not fictitious; they are based in fact. Similarly, we may feel 'actual anger' in response to the villagers in *Frankenstein*, yet acknowledge that they are not real and that we cannot act against them. Another problem is that the quasi-emotions do not make us *feel* any different from actual emotions. Quasi-emotions do not have to be any more subdued than factual emotions. It is empirically accounted for that people frequently have emotional responses to fiction that are just as intense as their responses to real life are. These responses are often followed by the very same physiological changes as the responses to real life. A person may cry, sob, and bawl every time he/she watches their favorite film. If the Quasi-emotions are not sufficiently distinct from actual emotions, then they are not philosophically sound. *If I decided to grow my own brand of quasi-potatoes, yet I could not justify in which way they are different from actual potatoes, on what*

basis could I call them anything but potatoes? The Quasi-emotionalist theory has to be concluded as insufficient.

The third school of thought is the Thought theory. The Thought theory is very similar to Factualism. It also states that we are misidentifying the object of our emotions. It claims that the object of our emotions are the thoughts. Continuing to make use of our *Frankenstein* example, the Thought theory would suggest that we are not angry at the villagers but at the thought of someone inflicting violence and rejection on a hero because of the said hero's monstrous appearance.

My conclusion, then, is simple: when we respond emotionally to fictional characters we are responding to mental representations of thought-contents identifiable through descriptions derived in suitable ways from the propositional contents of fictional sentences. I think this conclusion, given the arguments leading up to it, affords explanations of a number of puzzling features of fictions. It shows, for example, how we can know something is fictional but still take it seriously without having to believe or even half-believe it. We can reflect on, and be moved by, a thought independently of accepting it as true. This in turn accounts for intuition that belief and disbelief stay in the background when we are engaged with fiction. It explains any apparent dissimilarity between our emotional responses to fiction and 'real life emotions'. Although, indeed we do not react to the killing of Desdemona as we would to a real killing before our eyes, we do react much as we would to the thought of a real killing. The thought and the emotion *are* real. (Lamarque, 302)

Already we can see how this is similar to the Factualist theory which we have discarded as based on semantics, and thus very problematic. Colin Radford has a brisk, potentially facetious, argument against Peter Lamarque's theory: "Lamarque claims that I am frightened by 'the thought' of the green slime. That is the 'real object' of my fear. But if it is the moving picture of the slime which frightens me (for myself), then my fear is irrational, etc., for I know that what frightens me cannot harm me. So the fact that we are frightened by fictional thoughts does not solve the problem but forms part of it." (Radford, 261) I find Radford's argument against the Thought theory to be very persuasive. I also find that the Thought theory is very similar to the Factualist theory and thus ineffective on the same grounds that I used in my conclusion against the Factualist theory.

The final theory is that of Irrationalism. "Our being moved in certain ways by works of art, though very 'natural' to us and in that way only too intelligible, involves us in inconsistency and so incoherence." (Radford, 78) Robert Radford sets out to make an argument for irrationalism by establishing three axioms. First, for emotions to be rational the objects of our emotions need to be real. For example: "A is angry at B because A thinks that B stole his bicycle. B did not steal A's bicycle. A's anger is irrational." Second, objects of fiction are not real. This is not a difficult axiom to accept as 'unrealness' is the very nature of fiction, and no previously-cited philosopher has argued against that fact. Three, we do, in fact, feel emotionally moved by works of fiction. Despite the Quasi-emotionalist argument that we do not actually experience emotions, but rather 'quasi-emotions,' or the Factualist argument that the object of our emotion is not actually the fiction itself, let us for a moment accept this intuitive premise. Given that all three of these premises are correct, we have to conclude that the emotions that arise from fiction

are irrational. We have already concluded that the object of a rational emotion has to be real, and that objects of fiction are most definitively not real. You may ask the question, how is this argument different from any of the previous arguments? The first difference is that it does not seek to undermine what we instinctively perceive as the true object of our emotion. The theory acknowledges that the fiction itself really is the object of our emotion. The theory does not dispute that in our example of *Frankenstein*, the objects of our emotion really are the villagers. Second, it does not attempt to displace our emotions with ‘quasi-emotions.’ These two distinctions are important, because the ideas that we are displacing the objects of our emotions with thoughts or similar corresponding real life facts (as Factualism claims), or that our emotions are actually ‘quasi-emotions’ are all counter-instinctual. Whereas, the idea that our emotions may simply be irrational is not counter-instinctual. But instinct does not matter in philosophy. I only bring this up because, in both philosophy and science, simple ideas tend to provide greater results than convoluted ones. I find Irrationalism to be the least objectionable theory so far due to its simplicity and a lack of glaring inconsistencies. I will apologize in advance for displacing philosophy with science for a moment. However, given that we are using philosophy to give an account of reality (why do our ‘real selves’ experience emotion that arises from fiction), we cannot neglect some of the finer points of that reality. Recent neurological research has discovered that mirror neurons, the brain cells responsible for empathy and, potentially, a range of emotional responses, process the stimuli from fiction in the same way they process stimuli from real life. In other words, when it comes empathy and, potentially a range of emotional responses, our brain cannot tell the difference between fact and fiction. Therefore, we can conclude that our brain acts ‘irrationally’ when processing emotional responses to fiction.

The mirror mechanism suggests that it is not a matter of reflection at all: you feel what the other person is feeling or what the character is doing on screen because the same thing is happening “in” you. . . . But he does not shy from saying that mirror neurons could be in other areas of the brain as well, such as the insula and frontal operculum, that involve other faculties, such as emotion, which could in turn influence motor response.

(Badt)

A potential objection to this theory would be that we are aware that the fiction we are reading, or watching, is indeed not real. In other words, how could we possibly be irrational? The response to that objection would be that only the part of our brain that is responsible for emotional response is confused, whereas the rest of our brain has no difficulty distinguishing fact from fiction. This is why we do not respond to a play by running up to the stage of a theater to rescue a character before he is about to be unjustly killed, but we still do cry and hope that he gets away (even though we very well know that the actor is not really being killed, but merely the fictional character).

Earlier in the paper when I began my analysis of the second of the three questions that I posed in my introductory paragraph, I said that I will set horror aside for a moment. One of the reasons I set horror aside is because anger is a much simpler emotion to use an example for the purpose the second question (why do we experience emotions that arise from fiction?). However, there is also one more reason. I could not compare real life horror to fictional horror because horror is an emotion that can *only* be experienced through fiction. Now that I consider that, horror would be an excellent emotion to rebuke the Factualist theory because there is no real life actuality that would inflict true horror on a person. Now, you may be thinking: “Hold on, I’ve

experienced horror in real life situations plenty of times.” But this brings us back to our first question (the analysis of horror). One must remember that horror is not merely fear, or disgust, or nausea. It is a very specific, distinct emotion that we experience when categories of the natural world are violated. This is why horror could not have existed before the scientific account of the world was established. These categories cannot be violated because they would require a violation of the physical world. This is why horror, as a genre, is closely related to science fiction. The piece of fiction that we used throughout the paper, *Frankenstein*, is considered to be not only the very first example of horror fiction, but also the very first example of science fiction. This brings us to my third question: Why do we enjoy horror, if it is indeed an unpleasant emotion? There are several ‘easy’ answers to this question. For example, one could say that we enjoy watching horror because we like to experiment with the horrific in a safe environment. Another answer could be that we enjoy horror because the horrific the circumstances and the villain are, the more cathartic the hero’s triumph will be. Perhaps we enjoy horror because we are trying to demystify the unknown: “Fiction is how we both study and de-fang our monsters. To lock violent fiction away, or to close our eyes to it, is to give our monsters and our fears undeserved power and richer hunting grounds.” (O’Brien) But I will argue that the answer to why we enjoy horror is much more profound to that and we will need to answer a much more difficult question, which is: why do we enjoy any art? What is the purpose of art?

Viktor Shklovsky argues that the purpose of art, and what we find so pleasurable about it, is *ostranenie*. *Ostranenie* is a Russian term that roughly means ‘defamiliarization.’

The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar’, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic

end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important. (Shklovsky)

Shklovsky provides us with an example of *ostranenie*. He analyzes Leo Tolstoy's use of the technique:

In the article "Ashamed," L. Tolstoy estranges the concept of flogging: "people who have broken the law are denuded, thrown down on the floor, and beaten on their behinds with sticks." and a couple of lines later: "lashed across their bare buttocks." There is a postscript: "And why this particular stupid, barbaric way of inflicting pain, and not some other: pricking the shoulder or some other body part with needles, squeezing arms or legs in a vice, or something else of this sort." I apologize for this disturbing example, but it is typical of Tolstoy's way to reach conscience. The customary act of flogging is estranged both by the description and by the proposal to change its form without changing its essence. (Shklovsky, 81-82)

If *ostranenie* is the core of all art, we must be able to successfully apply it to the piece of horror fiction we have made extensive use of in this paper: *Frankenstein*. To begin with, the very interstitial nature of the monster, on which all of horror is based on, is itself *ostranenie*. It defamiliarizes us corpses. Normally we think of corpses as motionless, and usually buried. In *Frankenstein*, we have corpses stitched together, forming an animated abomination. But *ostranenie* does not merely extend to the horrifying aspects of *Frankenstein*. This interstitial monster, that has the mind of a child, but the body of an adult (a monstrous one, but an adult just the same), allows us to partake in an original perspective of the world. *Frankenstein* does not only defamiliarize us with corpses, but, through the eyes of the monster, it defamiliarizes us with

the world. In the second section of the essay we talked about the anger we felt against the villagers who imposed violence and rejection on the monster after it saved a girl from drowning. But if we examine that scene closer, and take away the monster, we would notice this is a scene that repeats itself before our eyes constantly, in both fiction and real life. Yet we have grown so accustomed to witnessing regular mistreatment and marginalization of people that such mistreatment needs to be presented anew; it needs to be defamiliarized for us to truly notice it, just like Tolstoy had to defamiliarize the practice of flogging in order for people to notice it. It is a significant leap of faith to ask you to believe that all art is defamiliarization, merely on the basis of these two examples. But clearly, the concepts of the *interstitial* and *ostranenie* are critical to our experience of horror. To answer the third question, the reason why we pay to be horrified, is that we have a deep need to see the world anew and to defamiliarize ourselves from things that are so familiar they have become invisible.

In conclusion, while horror may be a relatively new emotion, its underlying foundation, interstitiality, is anything but new. It is in fact the foundation of all art. *Interstitiality*, or *ostranenie*, are methods by which we defamiliarize ourselves from the world. This defamiliarization is not only why we enjoy horror, but horror itself is a defamiliarization. Horror is an emotion that is deeply rooted in art. Horror cannot exist without art. It is not an emotion that can be experienced within the confines of the real world. The question of why we experience emotions arising from fiction remains unsolved. I believe I have made an argument as to why the Irrationality theory is the least objectionable of the current philosophical theories that form the bulk of the discourse on the topic. However, I will reiterate that, especially taking horror into account, the Factualist theory has to be the least likely to be correct. I decided to examine this

question because horror is an emotion type that is closely tied to fiction, perhaps more closely than any other emotion type. However, I have concluded that a complete and definitive account of why we experience emotions that arise from fiction is unnecessary to understanding horror as an emotion type, and our powerful need to experience it, and more generally, to experience defamiliarization, or *ostranenie*.

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