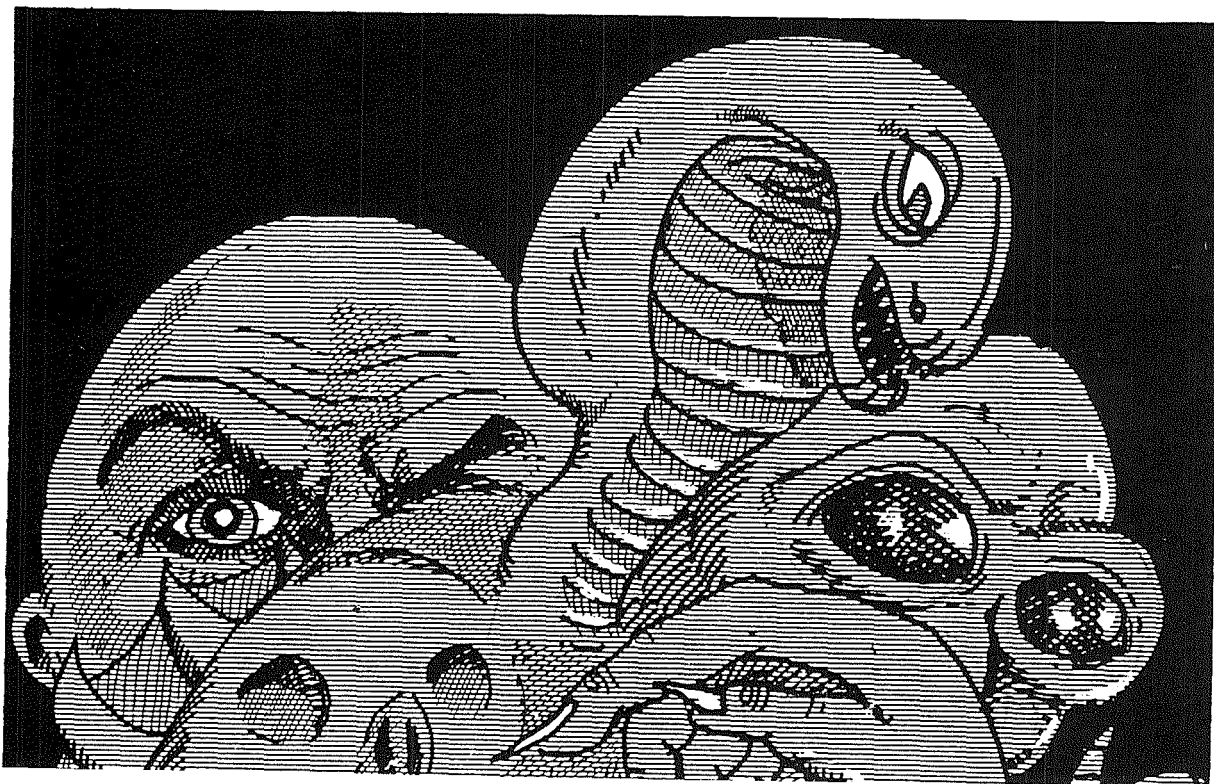


Cognition and the Development of Fear

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It is significant that most sources of childhood and later fears identified by various investigators can be broadly categorized in terms of a general tendency to fear the very strange, especially when it is closely associated with the familiar, and that a key factor influencing whether or not an object or situation will arouse fear is the amount of control which is felt in its relation. The prospect of pain, for instance, which according to G. Stanley Hall "puts to life the question of its very survival or extinction, complete or partial", was reported by C.W. Valentine² to have produced surprisingly little fear in the children he tested as long as it was roused in circumstances under the child's own control, in an expected form, and in a familiar situation. It is, of course, the type of control supplied by our knowledge and expectations about our surroundings (Sartre's "hodological map" or the mental construction of reality created in the course

of an individual's numerous experiences with his milieu which is at the base of Piaget's assimilation-accommodation model of the cognitive system) which is challenged or removed when we are faced with the very strange or the uncanny. For the human infant, as with many animals, strangeness elicits alarm: sudden noise, loss of support, jerky movements, quick changes of luminescence, and objects that rapidly expand or advance will cause an infant to show signs of distress. But what constitutes "strangeness" and the methods of coping with it will also change with the child's developing awareness and understanding of its environment.

The evolutionary implication of this process and its links with human helplessness are instructively outlined by Bruner *et al*:

Man seems to have evolved with a unique capacity

for helplessness that can be 'relieved' by outside shaping and external devices... The early helplessness of man... seems to be accompanied by a propelling curiosity about the environment and by much self-competence in that environment.... Indeed, the degree to which a supply of stimulation creates a demand for it may be crucial for a species in which morphological adaptation has become so supplemented by technological adaptation - a species that, in Weston La Barre's striking phrase... survives by grace of prosthetic devices.³

The extent to which competence and a sense of mastery will be achieved in a given context is heavily influenced by the rhythms and discords of what M.E.P. Seligman calls the child's "dance with his environment". According to Seligman⁴, the process of development moves from the neonate's almost complete lack of control over outcomes to the ability to make voluntary responses which are perceived to influence outcomes. If the child perceives its responses to be independent of what changes occur in the environment, or to have no influence on that environment at all, then a sense of hopelessness will develop. The motivational, cognitive and emotional deficits which Seligman claimed to result from learning that outcomes are uncontrollable were later⁵ placed within an "attributional analysis of helplessness", which took more detailed account of individual differences and the question of when and where helplessness will generalize across situations and time when humans are involved. The emphasis here fell on whether an individual attributes his failures to his own limitations or to universal ones, and on ways in which the cause of failure is perceived and interpreted. In other words, both the nature of the environment and the individual's cognitive appraisal of it have to be taken into account in any attempt to chart out the stages which mark the development of helplessness and fear.

Mary Warnock⁶ argues that the "power in the human mind which is at work in our everyday perception of the world, and... in our thoughts about what is absent" derives its impetus "from the emotions as much as from reason". This partly accounts for "the capacity we have... for taking things as significant, for seeing more in them than would meet the purely sensory eye". This capacity, i.e. the imagination, "has two functions which go together: to shape by means of an inner poser, and to allow us to feel". Following Kant, Warnock underlines the implications of this approach by asserting that

without the fictions of the imagination... we would not perceive our familiar world, and this means that we would not perceive the universal element in the world. We would be lost in an ocean of particular impressions.

The "fictions of the imagination", then, inspired by emotion as much as by reason, determine to a large extent the manner in which we perceive our environment. Cultural differences, because they

determine the range of possibilities of which an individual can become aware, have frequently been reported as influencing the ways objects and environment are perceived. Emotions too, it should be recalled, "are basically forms of cognition"⁷, so that what one feels in relation to a particular situation is determined by the manner in which the situation is appraised, i.e. by whether one perceives it as agreeable or disagreeable, familiar or dangerous.

The type of interaction taking place here is only inadequately suggested by terms like "stimulus and response". Our reaction to an image which disconcerts us by its uncanny newness or incongruity, and the manner in which that reaction is influenced by the way in which we have come to interpret our interaction with an environment, raise questions both about the workings of consciousness and about what the term "image" implies. In *The Psychology of Imagination*, Sartre asserts that "the image, like the sign, is a consciousness" and that "a consciousness does not have an opaque and unconscious surface by which it can be seized and attached to another surface"⁸. Sartre underlines the motivational factors which come into operation when a sign or an image (a "consciousness" according to his definition) acts upon our cognitive appraisal (or another consciousness):

Between two consciousnesses there is no cause and effect relationship. A consciousness is through and through a synthesis, completely withdrawn into itself: it is only at the very heart of this internal synthesis that it can join itself to another preceding or succeeding consciousness by an act of retention or protention. Moreover, if one consciousness is to act on another, it must be retained and recreated by the consciousness on which it is to act. There are no



passivities, but internal assimilations and disintegrations at the very heart of an intentional synthesis which is transparent to itself. One consciousness is not the cause of another: it motivates it.⁹

The implications of these standpoints can be profitably considered through an examination of a type of fear which appears to presuppose a high order of imagination. The fear of the dark has often been associated with the unease of separation and the absence of the comfort and security provided by loved ones. In one of his discussions of infantile anxiety, Freud¹⁰ argued that children "are afraid in the dark because in the dark they cannot see the person they love; and their fear is soothed if they can take hold of that person's hand in the dark". The fear of darkness is in fact most acute in children when they are alone and therefore without the direct reassurance of protection which their trust in, say, adults normally affords. But reassurance does not come exclusively from loved ones: a familiar environment which a child can see to contain no threats can also serve this purpose to varying degrees. Indeed, the "visual cliff" experiments of Gibson and Walk¹¹ suggest that infants will come to place more trust in their visual perception of situations and objects than in reassurances offered by parents. A child's fears and anxieties (e.g. in the dark) are often only soothed when he is *shown* that there is nothing to be afraid of. Further, it is of significance that the "fear of darkness" only manifests itself when the child's dependence on visual perception becomes marked (usually after the first year of life)¹². Most of the reports on childhood fears of this



nature stress not so much the darkness itself but rather the terrifying imagery with which it becomes peopled. It is, in other words, not simply a sense of isolation which being in the dark can create. The absence of sharp visual details and the curtailment of the ability to move will also give rise to a sense of disorientation in which familiar or recognizable surroundings become transformed into indeterminate darkness and strange shades. In a sense, the child cannot as yet trust surroundings to remain constant and unchanging when the sharp outlines he can recognize when the lights are on can no longer be clearly perceived in darkness. One can interpret this type of uncertainty as an extension of Piaget's theories about difficulties related to the concept of conservation in the Preoperational Stage of human development. The undefined nature of an environment shrouded in darkness, where substances appear to change their shapes (as well as hiding recesses where potential threats may lurk), undermines the possibility of feeling control over outcomes. It is a sense of helpless vulnerability and a consequent state of anxiety which are most likely to prevail under these conditions. In this context, the slenderest perceptual cues are interpreted in terms of variously disturbing images encountered in other contexts. The images associated with the ambiguous shades need not be intrinsically threatening. C.W. Valentine, for instance, reported how a five-year old girl was terrified for several weeks because she saw cabbages all around her bedroom and a girl going out of the window¹³.

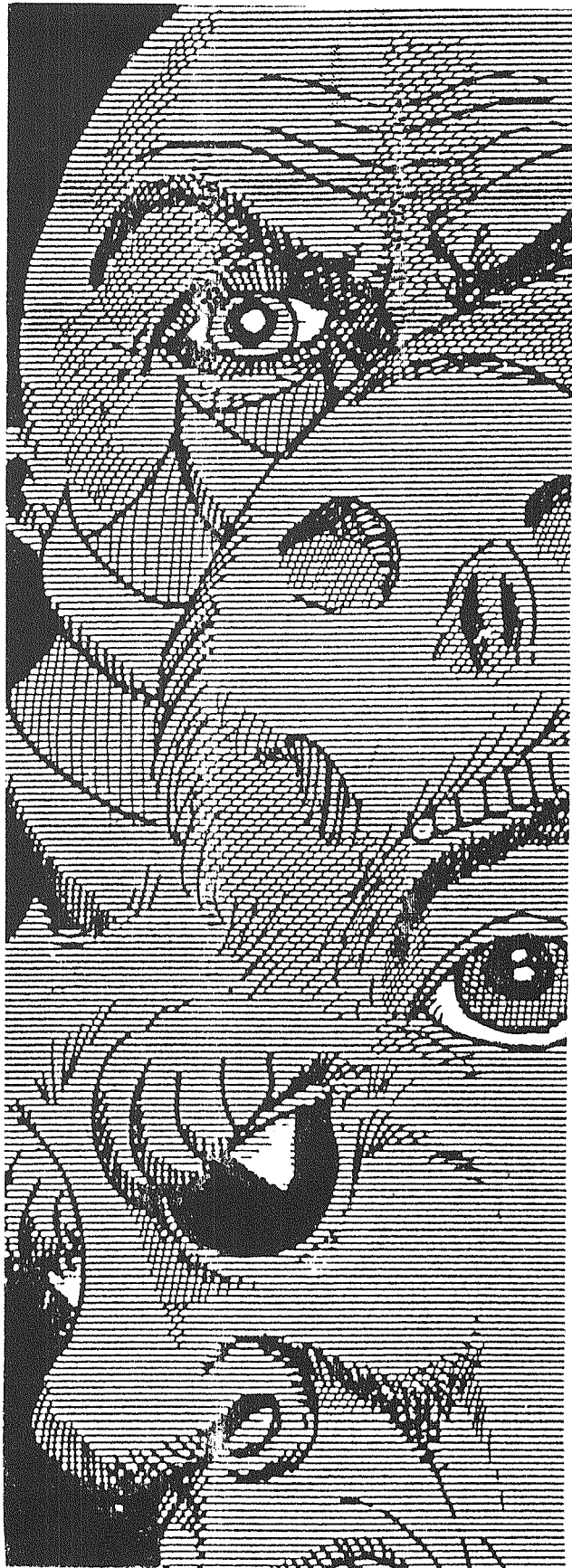
Adults too, in their endeavours to control and frequently to protect the young, will often warn against various imaginary or threateningly decked figures who will punish misbehaviour, or against, in the old cliché, sweet-proffering strangers whose friendly appearance is not to be trusted. The "dance" of perceptual and cognitive development of necessity brings the child into contact with objects, figures and situations which cannot (and often should not) be readily accommodated into a mental picture of secure reality. Nor is the "data" on which the child has to work of an unambiguous nature. When the reassurance afforded by clearly perceived outlines is thus undermined, as much as when the trusted presence of a protecting adult is not readily available, it is not surprising that disquieting associations will be perceived as forming a logical part of undefined surroundings. This will be especially the case when darkness accentuates the ambiguity of surroundings. According to J.L. Singer,

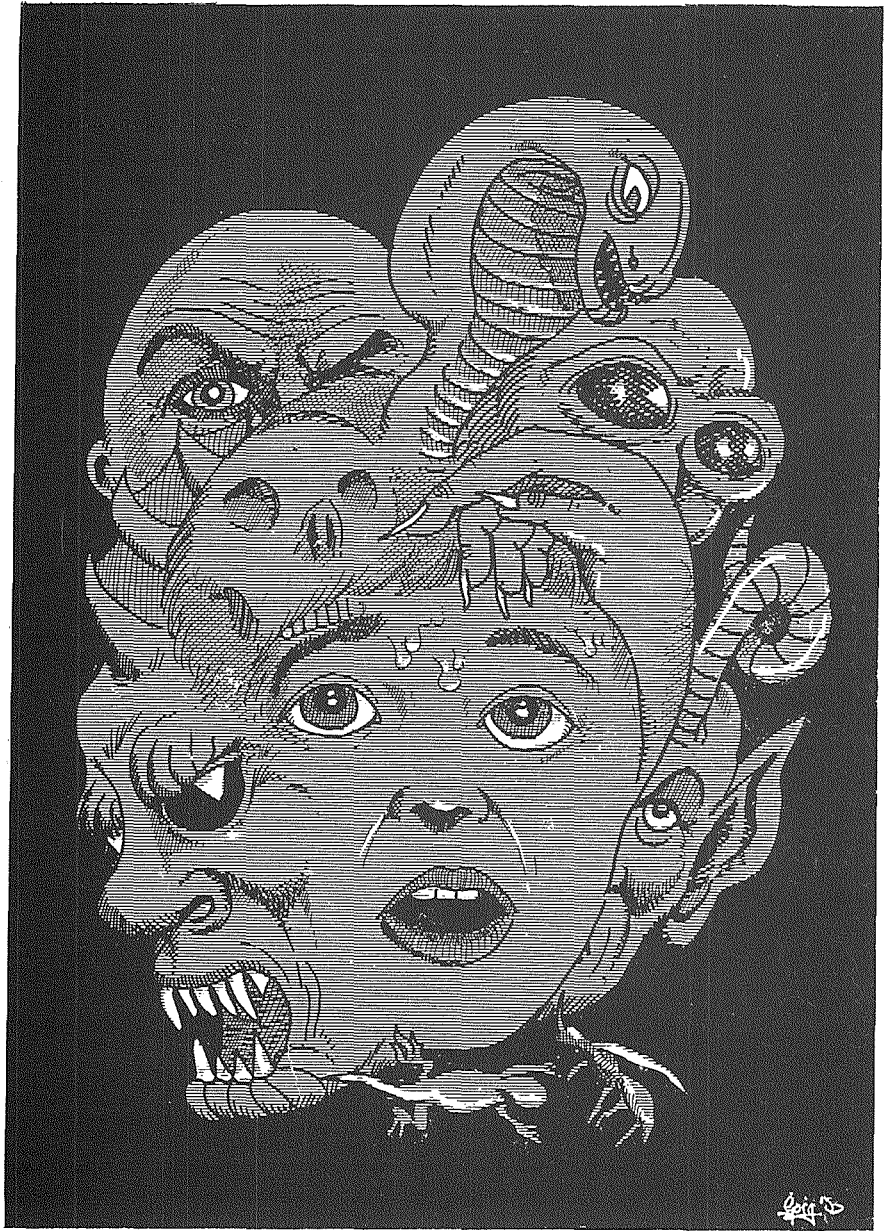
For the very young child the monsters of the movies and television are embodiments of those distortions and ambiguities that people the shadow world at night when the child is preparing for bed. Linked by

adults to bogeymen and other threatening figures, these monsters cannot be readily understood or grasped and therefore arouse negative emotion and terror.¹⁴

It bears repeating that the shapes taken by the "fictions of the imagination" in moments of uncertainty are strongly influenced by the cultural context in which we live and by the distinctions which we learn to make between what is "real", what is possible, and what is "unreal". According to Piaget's model of cognitive development, the cognitive system changes its internal structure by repeatedly attempting to accommodate and assimilate novel, previously unassimilated environmental elements. Because the environment is anything but clear-cut and the individual's contact with it is so often influenced and mediated by other agents (parents, peers and, supremely as the name suggests, the Media), the process of interaction can often be erratic. Thus, objects and situations which in reality present a substantial threat can be assimilated into a system which codes them as harmless since they can be associated with familiar and "safe" elements. The process of accommodation can also work on false premises when a mental picture of reality is restructured in such a way as to accommodate elements whose threat is unreal but which have been decked in a way which associates them with danger and distress. This of course is one of the ways in which "irrational preconceptions" and superstitious convictions can become part of a mental picture of reality (temporary or permanent as that picture will turn out to be depending on the types of further interactions which take place).

Reflections on childhood fears inevitably raise questions about the cultural and social context in which children grow. I have argued that it is a sense of helplessness in the face of the very strange which underscores most childhood fears, and that disturbing ambiguities are interpreted in terms of the fictions of the imagination inspired by the multiple rhythms of interaction with an environment. A child's understanding of what can be referred to as real and of what possibilities can be applied to the appraisal of a particular situation is of necessity dependent on his culture's interpretation of reality and on its awareness of the viability or otherwise of the significance it ascribes to its surroundings. If this is the case, then a study of fear aspiring to any cohesiveness will have to attempt an account of a specific cultural situation in a specific moment in history. Our age is one in which myths are resorted to in a dangerously insecure and often sceptical manner, so that a variety of symbols and modes of perceiving remain enmeshed in our attempts to appraise and evaluate our true bearings long after they have lost any direct relevance. The types of fear which are likely to fester in this context will have origins and





implications which cannot be properly understood or resolved if our awareness of competence or control in relation to our environment is no more than an exercise in self-deception, or if our lives are structured around a resigned sense of helplessness and ruled by the politics of bitter vacuousness.

1. G. Stanley Hall, "A Synthetic Genetic Study of Fear". In *The American Journal of Psychology*, XXV (1914) p. 152
2. C.W. Valentine, *The Psychology of Early Childhood*, 4th edn. (Methuen, 1950).
3. J.S. Bruner, R. Olver and P.M. Greenfield, *Studies in Cognitive Growth* (Wiley and Sons, 1966), pp. 2,4.
4. M.E.P. Seligman, *Helplessness: On Depression, Development, and Death* (W.H. Freeman and Co., 1975).
5. L.Y. Abramson, J. Garber, and M.E.P. Seligman, "Learned Helplessness: An Attributional Analysis" in J. Garber and

M.E.P. Seligman (eds.), *Human Helplessness* (Academic Press, 1980), pp. 3-34.

6. Mary Warnock, *Imagination* (Faber, 1976). The quotations are from pages 196, 199, 78 and 71 respectively.
7. J.P. Sartre, *The Psychology of Imagination* (Methuen, 1972), p. 27.
9. *ibid.*
10. S. Freud, *Three Essays on Sexuality*, *Standard Edn*, VII, ed. J. Strachey (Hogarth Press, 1953), p. 224.
11. E. J. Gibson and R. D. Walk, "The 'visual cliff,'" In *Scientific American*, 202 (1960), pp. 64-71.
12. See J.H. Bamber, *The Fears of Adolescents* (Academic Press, 1979), pp. 15-52; and Yi-fu Tuan, *Landscapes of Fear* (Blackwell, 1979), pp. 11-24.
13. Valentine, *op. cit.*
14. J.L. Singer, *Daydreaming and Fantasy* (Allen & Unwin, 1976, O.U.P. edn. 1981), p. 160
15. See J.H. Flavell, *The Developmental Psychology of Jean Piaget* (Van Nostrand, 1963); and *Cognitive Development* (Prentice-Hall, 1977).