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Horror Studies 8 1 Intro Anchors Away.pdf

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INTRODUCTION

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Anchors away!: Horror in the age of pessimism

Anyone who watched the American Presidential election last autumn – and who, in this age of global technologies, could have avoided it? – was assaulted by two rhetorical camps claiming to be opposed to each other by offering the same thing: hope in a world of increasing despair. While the Democrats under Hillary Clinton tried to further Barack Obama's slogan of 'Yes We Can!' by promoting a culture of social diversity and sustainable infrastructural development, Donald Trump and his Republican supporters tried to 'Make America Great Again' by invoking a relentless presentation of disasters under the liberal regime: eight years of governance under Obama had left people destitute, shut off from value in themselves, alienated from the political process. Such a pessimistic view of the future could only be redressed through metaphors gothic and horrific: identify Washington, DC, as a fetid swamp in need of draining, its tyrannical pretender Clinton in need of incarceration. For many of us, Trump's inauguration has moved politics from a world of gothic dread to one of palpable horror, not least because it mobilizes various forms of seemingly inevitable disaster: racial hatred, environmental apocalypse, and the dismantling of both public education and reputable news coverage. Such pessimism – what the candidate Trump had vowed to counteract, what POTUS Trump has brutally installed, and which finds its parallels in other recent right-wing political movements, such as Brexit – structures the individual's response to politics in 2017, whether that response be activism or inertia. And it is such pessimism that, perhaps not coincidentally, is the through-line of the contents of *Horror Studies* 8.1.

As our readers know, general issues of *Horror Studies* are collections of discrete essays placed together as timing would have it: the first issue of each volume consists of essays that have passed through our vetting process and have been collected under no rubric other than their being excellent work. Thus, it was both surprising and serendipitous for me as managing editor that this issue's essays were intensely concerned with *philosophies* of horror (five of the nine contributions here directly citing Noël Carroll's seminal *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart* [1990]), and that this philosophical interest was taking on the commitment to think about pessimism – indeed, to think *pessimistically* – in relation to millennial horror. The first two essays presented here, by Brian Zager and Ethan Stoneman and Joseph Packer, respectively, theorize explicitly what philosophy means by 'pessimism', and how such pessimism helps us to read horror. What follows from this rich theoretical foundation is a series of intellectual ruminations that, intentionally or not, address the prison house of pessimism and its relationship to the 'rhetoric' of horror. As we shall see, a number of our contributors seek alternative uses for the very pessimism that other contributors see as inescapable; yet in every case it is the *possibility for thought*, which pessimism makes available, that is at the core of the argument.

For Brian Zager, our first contributor, horror needs to be read not as the hyperbolic presence of monsters, destruction, and bodily mutilation, but as the omnipresence of nothingness that threatens human presence, a 'world-without-us' that Zager teases out of the philosophical work of Eugene Thacker and Jacques Derrida. Rather than revealing the totality of the human through its representational strategies, horror's rhetorics present only a 'flimsy facade', a 'primordial metaphysical unreality' of the human's being-in-the world. Reading Brad Anderson's *Vanishing on 7th Street* as a test case, Zager focuses on the transformation of the human into piles of empty clothes (an image we'll return to as David Roche reads Glazer's *Under the Skin*) as its ultimate fate, but also as its ultimate reality. For him the film stages futile attempts to invoke 'anchoring narratives' that would pretend away such a nihilistic vision, 'anchors' that Ethan Stoneman and Joseph Packer will delineate at much more length in their analysis of Thomas Ligotti and weird fiction. For them, the un-popularity of pessimism as a discussion topic is a mere symptom for the human refusal to 'fully apprehend […] the terror that is the world'. That very concept of the anchor – another preoccupation in this collection of essays – will emerge in David Roche's, Michael Fiddler's, and Suzanne Mayr's contributions as some form of 'empathy', but in each of these discussions the anchoring refuses to forget its central source in the work of Arthur Schopenhauer, the reputed grand-daddy of philosophical pessimism. For as Schopenhauer argued in *The World as Will and Representation* (2010), it is the function of art to afford us temporary relief from the pain caused us by our indomitable will (that is, the conglomerate of our desire, our self-presence, and our cognition), but such relief is always temporary: representation eventually betrays its futility in the dark, meaningless night of being. Anchors exist only eventually to be snatched away.

Not surprisingly then, it is the aesthetic of horror that may be the best place to watch that betrayal at work, because horror makes so salient the rhetorical strategies by which it defines and affects us. Such rhetorical strategies are indeed *formal* ones, as David Roche's analysis of Jonathan Glazer's *Under the Skin* makes clear. For Roche, a pivotal moment in the film comes when the totally amoral alien 'Female' encounters a 'fellow monster' initially

intended as her next victim – the so-called 'Deformed Man', who is the only one of the Female's victims not to be killed. As the Deformed Man cryptically slinks off into the night, the film stages the similarity between him and the Female as living 'as if' they were human, but without the qualifications of the human to ground such an ontology. The alien Female flirts with empathy here, but 'is equipped neither culturally nor biologically to experience it'. What human victims we *do* see become nothing but a gelatinous goo of skin floating in liquid: what is 'under the skin' that purportedly makes us human is revealed to be… nothing at all, and the film works formally to move us from seeing the alien other as monstrosity to identifying all life, human or otherwise, as merely a sign of the monstrous. Such audience manipulation – that is, the film's formal insistence that we identify with or 'emphasize' with characters who are incapable of giving or receiving the empathy we might bestow – is similarly at play in Zack Snyder's 2004 remake of *Dawn of the Dead*. This film, according to Nathaniel Cloyd, creates a formal problem like that in Roche's analysis, whereby Snyder's zombie apocalypse creates 'an imaginary solution to an unresolvable social contradiction', that contradiction being the millennial American's need to fear the mindless hordes of zombified others at the same time as positing a future Utopia that paradoxically sees all human Americans dead at the film's end. If, as Stoneman and Packer had suggested, 'Pessimists… find no comfort in space, intro- or extra-planetary, real or theoretical', then Glazer's alien-invaded Glasgow or Snyder's zombie-filled shopping mall become mere quotidian, homely spaces to display that *unheimlich* feeling of 'wrongness' that Stoneman and Packer say describes the world pessimistically viewed through the horrifying rhetorics of film.

Homely/uncanny, quotidian/alien: the brutal paradoxes take us to the more domesticated spaces of Michael Haneke's film *Funny Games* (1997) and Andrew Pyper's novel *The Guardians* (2011). For Michael Fiddler, *Funny Games* deploys the same confrontational strategies we've seen delineated above by creating of the home a paradoxically anti-human space. At once the beautiful, sun-lit, gated vacation paradise and the house to be 'breached in myriad ways', the home is invaded not just by murderous psychopaths but by the audience who is forced to watch the brutally slow torture of a family without being able to respond, or without being able to respond in any way other than complicity. (The film repeatedly has one of its villains break the fourth wall to speak directly to us about our sympathies *for* the victimized family and *against* our desire for a sadistic narrative.) Here too the political 'anchoring' of empathy falls short because of the film's formal rhetoric: to watch in sympathy is to replicate the visual assault the family must undergo as the house meant to protect them is the house that guarantees their demise. As houses are wont to do, if we consider Suzette Mayr's discussion of the Thurman house in Andrew Pyper's novel, *The Guardians* (2011): following the work of Gaston Bachelard, Mayr considers the horrific implications of the thesis that a house's architecture establishes the fundamental psychological architecture of the person who grew up in it. In a novel like Pyper's *The Guardians*, the home's historical violence can then privilege brutality over sociality, invoking a homosocially masculine community that all too easily becomes 'homohysterical', a misogynous and deadly gathering of terrorized men. In what may be one of the most solidifying and legible anchors of middle-class modernity, the home performs as the site of humanity's loss, its primordial nastiness and negativity.

If the post-human imagination, the pessimistic theory of a world-without-us, can undergird the horrifying absences of millennial horror, though, it

can paradoxically be turned towards more positive or reparative ends. James Morgart's audacious juxtaposition of Al Gore's environmental strategies in *An Inconvenient Truth* with John Wyndham's novel and its BBC adaptation, *The Day of the Triffids* (2009) marks a turn in the narrative that I've laid out so far, in that it posits the importance of the anti-human or post-human in imagining strategies that might actually save the planet from the Anthropocene. Producing human absence via monstrosity invites for Morgart a theorization through Deleuze and Guattari's 'becoming animal', in which the molecular conversion of the human into the animal (rather than the more anthropocentric ecostrategy that asks us to be nicer to the environment) reimagines life in ways not anchored by the legibly human. A similar displacement of the human occurs, although in a very different register, in Gavin Hurley's reading of Dario Argento. According to Hurley, Argento's films posit a 'simulational aesthetic' that actively undermines the realism of 'world' so that, rather than imagining a world-without-us, as previous pessimists do in these pages, Hurley's Argento asks us to consider a sort of 'us-without-world'. That 'us' – the viewer of Argento's *oeuvre* – is anchored in narratives that allow us to dodge the negativity of nothingness, but only by having us engage with a world we do not and cannot inhabit. We've met such a world before, of course – it was the world that *Under the Skin*'s alien Female tried to inhabit but couldn't, ill-equipped as she was to function with it – but in Argento we find a kind of post-humanity in the paradox that Hurley calls 'pure experience'. This pure experience transcends the egoistic projects of 'guilt, disgust, or ethical duty', thus transcending the limitations by which we define ourselves as human, and affords us a space to feel without risking the possibilities of the ethical.

We close with David Pendery, who returns us to where we began – with Noël Carroll's paradoxes of 'interstitial monstrosities' – but with very different implications from the ones our pessimistic philosophers argued for. While the pleasure of horror may be in the ways it affords us anchors or stimulations that distract us from the emptiness of our humanity, the rhetoric of horror – what many of our contributors identify as the *necessary* forming of representation – might also affirm the ways in which the body itself (and not the Cartesian mind controlling it) constitutes the experience of the horrific. Focusing on the biochemistry of consuming horror, Pendery argues for an embodied experience of horror that cannot be unanchored from its *longe durée* of evolutionary and adaptive responses to risk and threat. Pendery wants in some ways to affirm the humanist pleasure of horror's rhetorical effect on its consumer, but for him that pleasure only makes sense within the more pessimistic view of the rapacious, cruel, 'sensation-seeking' human-animal that needs repeatedly to identify danger in order to overcome it. In this sense horror *is* under the skin, it is *in* the home and the environment, but it is also *outside the delusional confines of the will* (as Schopenhauer would have it): it is an *auto*nomic experience that confirms us and evades us at the same time. And therein lies the 'paradoxes of the heart' that run through this issue: the experience of horror both shatters the human and anchors it in the very 'humanity' of its bodies, not least because it is a story we seemed compelled to keep on telling. And feeling.

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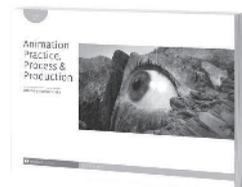
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